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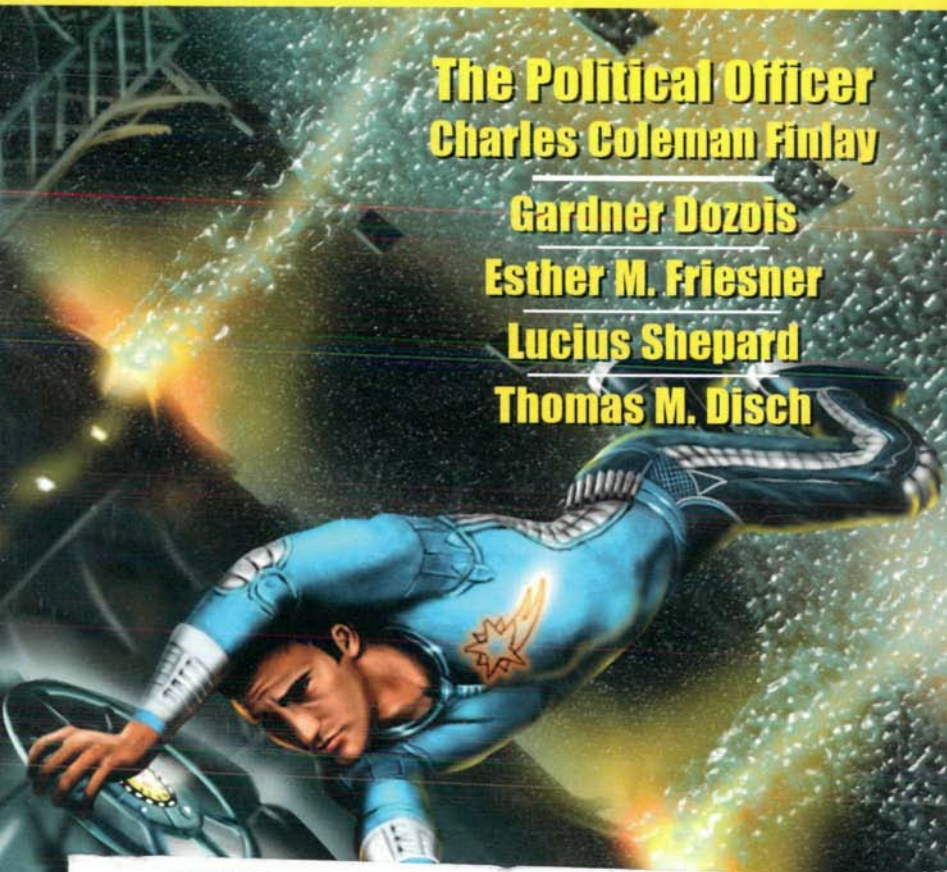

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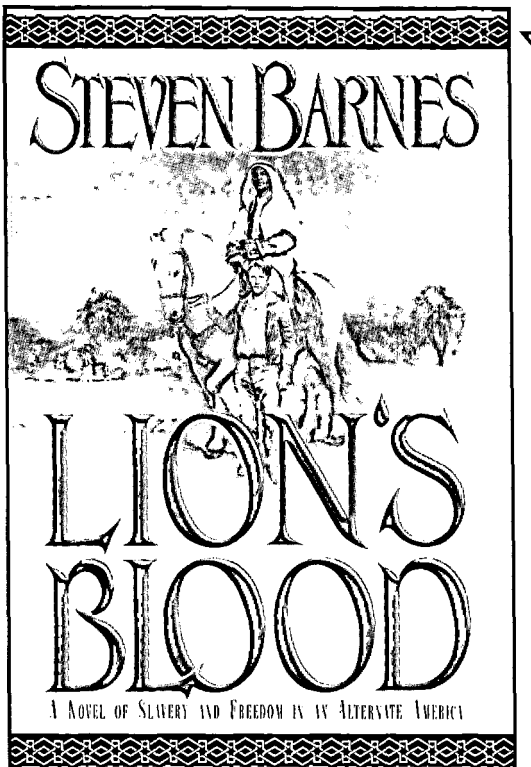

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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Reading her fiction makes one think that Esther Friesner likes animals. She taught us how to make unicorn pie in the story of that title a few years ago, and last year showed remarkable creativity in the treatment of certain amphibians with her story "Warts and All." Now she takes us deep into the heart of Dubya country (that's the great state of Texas, y'all) with a Tall Tale to make Pecos Bill...well actually, it would probably make Pecos Bill shudder, but F&SF readers will find it cause to rejoice.

Ms. Friesner notes that her current projects include writing the novelization of Men in Black II; *she can tell you how the movie turns out, but then she'd have to kill you.*

Just Another Cowboy

By Esther M. Friesner

ANY FOOL WHO TELLS YOU "Space is big" has never been to Texas. We are so big that we're more or less indifferent to things that folks from the underprivileged parts of this great land of ours would call sensational or spectacular or even just plain weirder'n a rat in tap shoes. When Armageddon hits, it's more than a little likely we'll look out across the plains, see the armies of locusts and the rain of blood and the Four Horsemen coming right at us and the most we'll do is write a stern letter to the local radio station, blaming it all on the Democrats.

Yessir, it takes a lot to hold our attention or rile up our curiosity. We make mighty poor tourists. (I got an uncle who can pee better than Niagara, a cousin who can blow his top more impressive than Mount Saint Helens, and as for the Grand Canyon, well, I'd rather not talk about my ex-wife Mercy June too much, if you don't mind.) If there is something interesting out there in the sorry badlands beyond our borders, we don't feel the need to go jackrabbiting off to hunt it down. Sooner or later it will come to Texas, if it's all that important. That's what you call gravity.

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Only problem with gravity is you don't get to choose what it picks up and flings at you. This is especially a trial when it decides to fling Easterners.

I'd been working at the Cottonwood ranch for some decades and several administrations of ranch owners when that vexatious female showed up out of New York City and into perdition. Being as I was just an employee of the Cottonwood there wasn't much I could do about it.

The female in question showed up on account of being the sister of Mrs. Joshua Perdenales Cathcart, the preantepenultimate ex-wife of ol' Josh P., third of that name, fifth of that bloodline, and most recent owner of the Cottonwood. Her connection to the ex–Miz Cathcart in and of itself would not have given her much claim to my patience or forbearance. Being married to Josh P. was a pretty common condition among the ladies in these parts. Due to his serial attractions to members of the opposite sex, his exes and their subsidiary kinfolk were as thick on the ground as cowpats at a rodeo and only a little less charming.

But the circumstances surrounding the arrival of this Eastern woman was somewhat distinct. For one thing, by the time she got to the Cottonwood, Josh P. had taken up the habit of sleeping alone. A coffin will do that to a man. For another, the ex-wife herself had suffered an unexpected interview with a speeding vehicle of some heft while attempting to cross a New York City street within twenty-four hours of Josh P.'s demise. Us boys down to the bunkhouse remembered this former Mrs. Josh P. and her habits, practices, and general comportment pretty good — her being closer to Current Events than Ancient History as the alimony check flies — so we could guess what'd happened. Not meaning to speak any ill of the dead, this particular woman was a lush, a boozehound, a gin-swilling, bourbon-belting, whiskey-guzzling rumdum of the first water. Only she never got near the drinking kind of water, first or last, in all the time she was living here. Josh P. liked his liquor as well as the next man, but even he got embarrassed by her carryings-on with the grape. You get yourself plastered and strip yourself buck-naked and dance the *macarena* at the Cattlemen's Ball once, that's just high spirits. You're still socially acceptable. Hell, you're still presidential material. But you get into the habit of doing it so much that the Cattlemen's Association starts clearing a time-slot on the dance card, in anticipation of the event, well,

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it gets to be more than even the most understanding of husbands can bear.

So Josh P. divorced her and she went back up north and he just happened to croak a few wives down the pike. His death changed everything — not least of all for him. While he always was a generous man with a divorce settlement, that was nothing as compared to how much unmitigated cash-and-miscellaneous-assets his Last Will and Testament dropped right into the lady's lap. Why hers, as opposed to some of the more recent and less shopworn laps that Josh P. had been dropping into after their divorce? Why, purely because this particular ex–Miz Cathcart had managed to accomplish something, in spite of all her drinking, that put her smack dab in the catbird seat when Josh P. himself went to his reward. Let's just say Josh P.'s fortune dropped *into* her lap on account of what had dropped *out* of it some years before.

As things happened, she did not get to enjoy her windfall worth a damn. Likely as soon as she got word of her former husband's death she went out to memorialize the sad occasion by getting drunk as an owl. I don't reckon an owl would have much hope of avoiding an oncoming SUV neither.

That was why it was her sister who showed up; her and the boy. The boy, in case you are a little slow or a high school guidance counselor, was the accomplishment of which I spoke.

Now ol' Josh P. might have got himself married more times than recommended by the United States government (I think it's the Department of Agriculture handles such things), but you wouldn't know it by anything 'cept his checkbook. He was not a results-oriented husband. To put it in the Biblical manner, he couldn't begat worth a hill of beans. In all the years of all those marriages, this little boy was the only son and/or heir that Joshua Perdenales Cathcart managed to leave behind.

That's what the boy's birth certificate said, anyhow. What the rest of us had to say was some different.

"*That's* Josh P.'s son?" Angel said, tilting his chair back against the bunkhouse wall. Ever since word came down that the boy and his aunt was coming, all us ranch hands had been setting out on the porch, waiting to get our first look at him. It was what you might call a letdown. "Why, that's the puniest, scrawniest, milk-and-water weakest excuse for a boy I ever saw!"

Now when Angel said this, it wasn't more than five minutes since the

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car carrying Josh P. the Fourth and his aunt pulled up in front of the ranch house and let them out. Shoot, the dust off the tires hadn't even settled yet. I hear a man can make a damfool of himself if all he goes by is first impressions, but in this case I was inclined to side with Angel. There was just no arguing over it: That boy was paltry, that's all there was to it.

I am not making this up; I saw it with my own eyes which, in spite of my age, are still sharp. Plus I got witnesses, namely Angel, and the rest of the boys, and Mr. Purvis who was not only our foreman but also a distant cousin of ol' Josh P., the executor of his will, and the one-man welcome committee who came out of the ranch house to greet the boy and his aunt as soon as they got there.

It didn't get to be much of a greeting. Why, no sooner did that child set foot on the soil of the Cottonwood but he doubled over, wrapped those twiggy arms around that chicken chest of his, screwed up the beadiest pair of eyes I ever did see that wasn't attached to some sort of rodent, and started coughing. He coughed long and he coughed hard, worse than a man of sixty who's been smoking three packs a day and taking a chaw in between, just to keep his hand in. (And I ought to know, seeing as how that is more or less my own personal history.) The whole time he was coughing, his aunt was fussing and fluttering around him, chirping and cooing like a box full of turtledoves when she wasn't squawking like a singed hen at Mr. Purvis to *do* something. ('Course when he tried to lay a helping hand on the boy she threw a cross-body block on him and didn't let him *do* a damn thing.) Finally she half-pushed, half-pulled, half-carried that boy inside the ranch house with Mr. Purvis tailing after.

As soon as the front door slammed, all us boys on the bunkhouse porch got to talking. Our general mood was not one of optimism, and when Jim came up to join us, things just plain went to hell.

Now Jim was the one Mr. Purvis sent to pick up the boy and his aunt at the airport in Dallas, so he'd had the longest exposure to 'em of anybody. He was usually a fairly cheerful man, but the look on his face at that moment would have caused a cold-blooded rattler to find a gun and evolve itself some fingers just so's it could stick the barrel in its own mouth and blow its brains out.

"It's bad, boys," was the first words out of his mouth when he stepped up onto the porch. "It's real bad."

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If any of us had had the bad taste to be Easterners, someone would've asked "How bad *is* it?" That is the sort of thing that Easterners consider to be high hilarity worthy of Don Imus or JoeBob Briggs or Voltaire or someone good like that. But being as how we were all Texans-thank-you-Jesus, we just set there and waited. Either a man's going to tell you how bad it is right out or he's not, in which case you will have to find it out for yourself. That's what you call one of life's little options.

Jim opted to tell us how bad it was: "You fellers get a look at the boy pretty good?" We nodded. "Tell me: You get a good look at that aunt of his too?"

This time we shook our heads. Truth to say, the aunt hadn't registered on our eyeballs so much as on our eardrums, what with all her shrieking and clucking and generally acting like the inhabitants of an aviary for the insane. We had noted in a vague sort of way that she had a fairly attractive physique, even if it was covered up in some of the dowdiest clothes we'd ever seen since the late, great Minnie Pearl, but that was about as far as we had gotten on the worksheet.

Jim got a grim little smile of regretful satisfaction on his face. "Thought so. Well, let me tell you, I *did* get a good look at her. Boys, that is what you call an angry woman. She's got more bristles than a javelina — not real ones, but I think you know what I mean — and they're sticking out like quills every breath she takes. Hostile? I seen wars that was friendlier. She does look a lot like her sister — if ol' Josh P. was still alive he'd be making a play for her even as we speak — but a wise man'd think twice before taking something that flinty to his bed, 'less he cared to spend a couple-three hours afterward laying a styptic pencil to some very personal portions of his anatomy."

We all shuddered. Jim did have him a way with words. "Yes, sir, I got me a big eyeful of her, all right," Jim went on. "And a bigger earful. It's a long drive from Dallas to here and she worse'n most women when it comes to the inability to leave a perfectly good silence just lay there. No sir, quiet is something that gets under her saddle blanket and chafes. Yap, yap, yap, all the way from Baggage Claim to the minute we pulled up in front of the big house. Thought I was likely to drive the car off a mountain, only there wasn't any convenient to the purpose along our chosen route. I blame the Democrats."

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Angel snorted. "Sounds to me like you caught a bad case of the yapping bug yourself, Jim. Any of what you're saying what a man might call relevant?

"Only so much as you getting your sorry ass thrown out of work by this time next month," Jim replied. "That relevant enough for you, boy?"

So that was how we got the news that Josh P.'s sister-in-law had come down here with the boy not so's he could embrace his proud Texan heritage but so's she could sell it off whole or piecemeal for top dollar, then hightail it back to the sorrowful desolations of Up North, Back East, and Central Park West.

"She can't *do* that!" Mitch piped up. He was the only man in our bunkhouse who even come close to being my age, which is considerable, and he had a historic attachment to the Cottonwood. "Who's she gonna sell the place off to, anyways? It's not like there's folks lined up to buy land what's only good for raising cattle. Not if the current economic indicators is, well, any kind of current economic indication."

(Mitch sometimes talked like that. He'd picked himself up a cumpulsory education during a long stint in a Dallas hospital recovering from a difference of opinion involving football stats, a pool cue, and his skull. The teevee in his room was stuck on CNN and none of us noticed when we come to visit. Thing like that will leave a lasting impression on a man, even more so than the aforementioned pool cue. We blamed our own negligence for his sorry condition and resolved to tolerate the after-effects like good Christians.)

"All I know is what I had to hear," Jim said. "She's more like an adding machine than a woman, that one. There's a way to squeeze blood out of the Cottonwood acreage, she'll do it. Then she'll bag up the squeezings and sell 'em to the Red Cross at a markup."

"She don't got the right to do it," Mitch said, looking grim. "It's not like it's *her* spread. It belongs to the boy, don't it now?"

"And the boy belongs to her," I pointed out. "Or pretty near. He's a minor, no more'n six, seven years old if he's day. She's his legal guardian and closest living relative. That carries weight. She can do whatever she likes in his name and all we got the power to do is bend over, grab our ankles, and hope she don't hurt us *too* bad."

"Ten," said Angel.

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"Come again, son?" I asked.

"He's ten years old," Angel said. "He's got to be. Can't be anything else if he's who they say he is. That's how far back Josh P. divorced his mama, remember? We could hear their last fight clear to the bunkhouse."

"And their last mutual physical reconciliation pact too," Mitch added. "Which was likely where the boy got his start in life, as it were."

"He don't *look* to be ten," I said.

"Boy can't help it he's puny," Jim said.

"Boy can't help it who his daddy is either," I said, stroking my chin. "His *real* daddy."

May the Good Lord forgive me, I do not know until this very day what possessed me to say something mean-spirited like that. I expect I did it because I was het up some about the possibility of the Cottonwood being sold out from under me in my old age. A man likes a little security when he starts to get on in years.

No, that's a lie. Oh, I cared *some* about about job security and having someplace safe to spend my declining years — I'd be seven kinds of fool not to — but it wasn't like the subject preoccupied my mind. All my life, I never once took the easy trail if I could help it. There's a kind of spice to turning your back on doing things like everyone else, living up or down to expectations. If I got tossed out on my rump on account of that Eastern woman selling off the Cottonwood, I knew I'd survive. I could get me a fresh start elsewhere, in spite of my years — there was more'n a few folks in those parts who owed me favors. So no, I was not thinking of myself when I said that unholy thing about that scrawny little child's *real* daddy.

The boys knew what I was thinking, though, you bet.

"You're worried 'bout Cordie, ain'tcha, Sam?" Angel said. A quick look 'round the faces assembled on the bunkhouse porch and I saw the same notion writ out in their expressions just as plain as though someone'd taken a big ol' rubber stamp and thumped CORDIE across their foreheads in bright red ink. Like I said, they knew.

I did not appreciate being so plain to read. A man ought to be able to keep something of himself to himself, otherwise he's no better than talkshow trash.

"You blame me?" I snapped.

Angel shook his head and the rest of 'em did likewise. It was like

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watching a whole row of them bobble-head dogs some folks stick on their car dashboards. "Blame you, *amigo*? Hell, what do you think *we're* all most worried 'bout?"

"You?" I said. "*You're* worried 'bout Cordie? How come? Not like he's your problem."

Angel laughed. "The hell you say, old man, the hell you say. There ain't a one of us here who don't have ties of some sort or t'other for him and you know it. Work with a man, ride with him, polish off a few quarts of whiskey in his company while he's skinning you alive at the poker table and then try telling me you don't worry on his account when his future looks dicey."

"Dicey?" Mitch echoed. "Doomed."

It was a harsh thing to say. It was also a true thing, and we all knew that, too. For a while, no one spoke. Then Buck broke the silence.

Now Buck is a good man, maybe the best man I'll ever know in this life. He's what you might call a wrangler's wrangler, born to the saddle. You want someone knows his way around a horse, Buck's your man. He's part Mexican, part Spanish, part Jicarilla Apache, with a touch of real Hawaiian *paniolo* thrown in for good measure due to his mama having won a trip out to Honolulu on some teevee quiz show back in the sixties where she discovered Mai Tais and made friends with the locals, in no particular order.

"Seems to me," Buck said in the slow-talking way he has. "Seems to me like that boy don't look too much like the man's 'sposed to be his daddy. Seems to me that it ain't especially natural for a man to have as many ladyfriends as ol' Josh P. did and this lone, puny, pitiful boy is all he's got to show for it. I ain't a suspicious man by nature, but did anyone ever hear a word about this child until now? One single, solitary word?"

Most of us allowed that we had not. Only Jim said different:

"There was a letter when he got born. Me and Mr. Purvis was with Josh P. when it come. I never will forget how bright his face lit up when he got word he had him a son. Why, he wrote out a check on the spot for twice the amount his ex was demanding out of him, and he ponied up more every month. There was photos, too. They come whenever she wanted to get a little more out of Josh P., between monthly installments."

"Photos," said Buck, shifting his chaw from one cheek to the other.

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"Nothing else? No invite to come up North and see the boy face-to-face?"

Jim shook his head. "Not that we ever heard tell."

"Uh-huh." Buck nodded and looked like he was onto something.

It didn't take much for us to tell what. "Oh, no," I said, shaking my head and feeling deeply pained by what I'd started. "No sir, Buck, you ain't thinking of doing *that*, are you?"

Buck cocked one eyebrow at me. "Sam, you got a good, solid reason why I shouldn't?"

"But Buck, that'd be...*cruel*. Downright pitiless cruel."

"Who to?"

"The boy, for one."

"The boy?" Buck laughed. "That sorry little scrap of gristle? Why should he care if we go raising the question of who his *real* daddy was? Seems to me like he's got enough worries trying to figure out where his next breath's coming from. Does he *look* like he'd care if we got a court to rule on this one way or t'other?"

"A *court*," I repeated, hoping that I would not have to spell it out for Buck, hoping against hope that I would not need to allow That Word to pass my lips. "That's just it: If we were fool enough to follow through on this sorry mess, we would have to take it to a court and scare up irrefutable evidence to back our claims and — and have close personal contact with certain unavoidable things with which a court of law is unfortunately connected. *You* know what I mean."

Gauging from how everybody shuddered, I reckon they did.

"You mean lawyers?" Mitch piped up without it being strictly necessary at all.

We all froze. He'd said That Word. There wasn't a one of us present but had had some previous dealings with That Word and come out the worse for it. Any other man had said That Word straight out like that, in front of Jesus and the dog, we'd've taken him off a decent distance and acquainted him with seven kinds of pain and five of affliction. Seeing as how it was Mitch, though, we had to grit our teeth and bear with it. It wasn't like the man could endure another blunt head trauma; not unless he was looking to make himself fit for nothing but a career in politics.

"That's — that's what I meant, all right," I said, wincing some. "Which is why we should not speak of this course of action any further."

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"Why not?" Buck persisted. "It's the one way we've got to cut that money-hungry harpy off at the pass; the *only* way. She's got her talons in the Cottonwood through the boy and he's got a claim based solely on him being Josh P.'s seed. When I take a tick off my dog I don't just pull off the body; I make sure I root the head out too."

I shook my head. "I don't like this."

Angel laid a hand on my shoulder. "You got to, Sam. For Cordie's sake, you got to."

Well, that was where we left the matter that day. We had us our formal introductions to the boy and his aunt later on, closer to suppertime. That was where we learned that her name was Miz Josette Marie Lewis and that the boy was called Fowler.

Fowler! If that didn't add insult to the injury of ol' Josh P.'s already being dead, I don't know what did. Oh, the pup still carried his so-called daddy's name, but tucked back a ways. He was Fowler Theodore Joshua Cathcart on his birth certificate, with the noble Perdenales left by the wayside entire like a box of spare kittens. It was a shame, I tell you, a burning, crying, gut-gnawing shame.

'Course it wasn't shame enough for me to come over to Buck's way of thinking, much as he tried to persuade me otherwise later that same night. That man talked *to* me and *at* me and *over* me and *through* me. I have never been jawed at quite so efficient in my life, and I been married. He kept *on* talking, too, trying to get me to join in on pursuing the case he was already building up in his mind. He'd got the other boys to fall in with him easy after the whole sorry *Fowler* episode. I was the lone holdout.

"But it was your idea to start with!" he protested.

"And as such it's my prerogative to take it out behind the barn, hit it with a shovel, and bury it as deep as it'll go," I replied. "I tell you, you can't *know* that the boy won't mind if you start talking trash 'bout who his real daddy was, even if he never met the man's supposed to've been. If nothing else it throws a truckload of mud over the memory of his mama, and there's not a soul alive, man or boy, will stand for that."

Buck made a dismissive sound. "He's young and she's dead. He'll get over it."

"I don't care what you say," I held on. "There has got to be another way around this. There has just *got* to."

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Well, they left me alone after that. We all went to sleep and when we got up the next morning no one said another word to me about little Josh's paternity (I was prepared to swallow a Gila monster head first before I would think of that helpless child by the name *Fowler*). Being somewhat of an optimist, which is just a crossword puzzle way of saying *idjit*, I even believed that I had got them to forget about the whole nasty thing too.

It was just after supper some two days later that Miz Josette came to call. She walked right up to the bunkhouse, bold as brass, to where we was all sitting out on the porch again. She planted her fists on her hips and shot us a look that could fry mutton.

"Which one of you barbarians is Samuel Henry Redburn?" she demanded in a voice so deep and rumbly with anger that half of us was checking the sky for thunder while the other half was checking her upper lip for a mustache.

"That'd be me, ma'am," I said, readily enough. I got up off of my chair and gave the lady a little by-courtesy bow like my mama taught me. "What can I do for you?"

"Come with me," she said. I thought for a minute there I heard her teeth grinding together when she said that, but that is what you call a linguistic impossibility. She turned on her heel and stalked away, back toward the big house. I did not obey her straight off. First I gave the rest of the boys one of those looks that's part honest puzzlement and part cold-eyed suspicion. They tried to look innocent and sympathetic, both of which was dead giveaways that they'd done something for which I was about to feel the spiky business end of a lady's wrath.

Well, you only need to die once. I went after her.

She did not stop walking — never once looking back to see if I'd come along with her as ordered — until we was past the big house and out by the corral. It was empty at that hour, the horses bedded down for the night, and none of the other ranch buildings within earshot even was a person to start yelling at another person at the top of her lungs. Which she did.

I do not wish to subject another living being to the sort of abuse that poured out of that woman's mouth and down my ear-holes. Anger played her voice like a theramin, sending it from the depths of Charlton Heston to the heights of PeeWee Herman, sometimes within the space of a single dirty word. If you are prepared to do me the kindness of hearing out what

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I got to tell you, I am not going to presume upon your generosity by making you sit through a whole lot of yammer that basically boiled down to the fact that as far as Miz Josette Marie Lewis was concerned, I was a man who had all the socially redeeming value of squirrel snot.

Now it did not take a college degree for me to figure out what had brought out this ugliness in what was an otherwise handsome woman. Soon as she stopped the eruption of venom to take a breath, I leaped into the breach and said, "This is about the boy, ain't it?"

"*Yes*, it's about the boy!" she snapped back. "My God, how stupid *are* you?"

I decided to let that slide by. "How'd you find out?"

"That you were plotting to steal poor little Fowler's inheritance right out from under his nose? That you were going to try smearing my poor, dead sister's name with any kind of filth you could get your stinking hands on? That you've got the pure, unadulterated gall to claim that poor baby is a bastard?"

Poor and *poor* and *poor*, that's how she tried to make me feel sorry for what the boys were trying to do to ol' Josh P.'s supposed offspring. Well, that's the rich for you.

"Yes'm," I replied.

"A phone call came today," she told me. "A call from our attorney in New York. He has received word from some two-bit Dallas shyster that the late Mr. Cathcart's will is going to be contested in the Texas courts. Naturally he informed me as to the basis for such an action as well as the identity of the person who had instigated this — this — this *abomination*."

I sighed and leaned back against the corral railing. "Ma'am," I said, "judging from the way you're looking at me, I reckon you think this was all my idea. Well, it's not. Oh, I did have the bad judgment to think aloud along those lines and some of the boys overheard me. They're the ones as set the wheels in motion, and I suspicion they thought they was doing the right thing, putting my name to it, giving credit where it's due, whether or not it was ever asked for. I tried talkin' 'em out of it, but — "

"I'll just bet you did," she snarled. "Come off it, cowboy. That *Aw, shucks, 'twaren't nothin'* routine may work on the inbred brain-dead bimbos you've got down here in the boondocks, but *I* went to Vassar!"

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"Yes, ma'am," I said, still holding myself in check. After all, like the lady said, she went to Vassar. She'd suffered enough.

"You admit it was your idea," she went on. "Karl Marx didn't pull the trigger of the guns that killed the Romanovs, but don't try telling me he had nothing to do with their fate!"

"No, ma'am," I said. "And the nineteenth-century financiers, industrialists, and oligarchs whose ruthless exploitation of the proletariat created the perfect socioeconomic milieu to foster the viability of Marxist doctrine becoming reality were somewhat involved in the shooting as well."

It took the lady some time to get her jaw up off the ground after that. (I guess a little of Mitch's enforced CNN viewership rubbed off on me some while I was visiting him.) Before she was once more sufficiently collected to resume telling me what a pile of rattlesnake poop I was, I decided to lay hold of the upper hand.

"Ma'am, I know you hate me and you got every right to. That boy, I reckon he's the only kin you got left in this world, ain't that so?" She didn't say a thing, just nodded. If I'd known the woman-shutting-up benefits of higher education I'd've finished eighth grade long ago. "Well, that's what I thought," I said. "And you just want what's best for him, right?" She nodded again. "Only thing is, you can't help it if you got kind of a limited viewpoint on the subject. The way I see it, you assume that more money's the answer to everything."

By that time she'd found her voice again and she used it to declare, "Of course it is! Anyone with a scrap of sense knows that."

"Well, beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but you're wrong; dead wrong. There's things in this world that money won't buy, no matter how many infomercials you listen to. There's things that'll do a boy a lot more good than a fat bank book."

"Lovely sentiment," she sneered. "Shall I cue the violins or will banjos be more appropriate?"

I will be the first to admit it, the woman was starting to rile me. I could feel my jaw muscles tighten up with every contemptful word that came out of her mouth. I have never struck a lady in my life, except in self-defense during a fair bar fight, but I have read any number of senior citizen-oriented periodicals that encourage us to embrace new experiences as a

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way of keeping our spirits young and I was about this far from embracing the experience of giving Miz Josette Marie Lewis a healthy boot to the tailbone.

I took a deep breath, ready to give the woman one last chance to go back East with her hindquarters untrammeled. "Ma'am — " I began.

"Oh, stop that *ma'am* crap," she said, curt. "I'm having flashbacks to every Gary Cooper, Henry Fonda and Jimmy Stewart Western my father ever forced me to watch. Call me Ms. Lewis."

"Is that what the boy calls you?" I asked, trying to match her scorn for scorn.

"Don't be ridiculous. Fowler calls me Josette."

Well sir, that brought me up short and no mistake. "You mean to stand there and tell me that that little boy, your nephew, your dead sister's son, your one and only blood kin in this mean and sorry world, calls you by your *name*?"

She shrugged. "What's the big deal? I gave him permission to do so."

"But you're his *aunt!*" I protested. "Not his waitress. How come you don't have the boy call you Aunt or Auntie or — or — or, I dunno, something like that in Latin or French, one of them high-class dead languages? You're *kinfolk*. It ain't right for kinfolk to have barriers between 'em, even if they're only words."

She cocked her head and looked at me like I'd been caught chewing a mouthful of loco weed. "You're the person responsible — directly or not — for trying to separate Fowler from half his parentage and all his financial security. What the hell do you really care about — " She made a face like she'd just tongue-kissed a Democrat. " — *kinfolk*?"

That was it. That was purely *it*. My patience was gone, my forbearance in the face of disadvantages like Eastern rearing and a Vassar education had been exhausted. I stood tall. My eyes narrowed. My jawline turned to steel and stone. Too bad that night was coming in; I looked impressive, all right, but there wasn't light enough for the lady to get the full effect.

"You go ask anyone on this ranch 'bout my stance concerning kinfolk, *Miz* Lewis," I said. "Onliest reason I ever let them unfortunate words out of my mouth — the things I said 'bout how maybe ol' Josh P. wasn't that boy's real daddy — was 'counta my *own* kinfolk and the debt

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I owe 'em. See, if you went ahead and sold the Cottonwood, like we heard tell you was planning to do — "

The woman clicked her tongue and tossed her chin up just a mite, like when you find your dog's left a puddle on the floor but you know it's no use getting angry 'cause he's too dumb to learn and if you shot him he'd be too dumb to die. "Oh, for the love of God, you moron, is that where all this legal folderol came from? Because you and the rest of those lazy ticks thought I'd sell the ranch and toss you out without a dime? That was never my intention — not originally. I was going to provide each of you with a tidy severance package, but now? I'd be lying if I said that I haven't changed my mind after what you're trying to pull. When I got that phone call from my attorney — "

"There you go again, back to the money like a dog to its vomit," I said. "When are you gonna try *listening* for a change, woman? It wasn't the money that got me het up over losing the Cottonwood. It wasn't how I might not have where to lay my head if you threw me off the ranch. It was *Cordie*, godammit! It wasn't nothing else but Cordie, it never was, and it never will be!"

I was shouting pretty good by the time I got to the end of my breath. It was a wonder that no one up to the big house heard me. Or maybe they did, but soon as they heard me say Cordie's name I reckon they decided I'd reached the point of no return and was prepared to kill Miz Lewis with my own two hands and no one wanted to be a witness.

When the echoes died down some, the lady was staring at me with the first hint of respect I'd yet seen in them eyes. Respect, or maybe just plain terror to find herself out by the corral alone with a lunatic. "Who — who's Cordie?" she asked.

"My son," I said. And I began to cry.

IT WAS NEXT MORNING, about an hour before dawn, that I found myself, against my better judgment, riding escort for Miz Lewis as we headed off into the far western acreage of the Cottonwood ranch. I didn't favor the circumstances under which we'd set out. The terrain out thataway was mostly trackless scrub and rough going besides. A Jeep could take you there, but it wouldn't be a pleasant experience for you or

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the vehicle. Best way to go, if you absolutely could not avoid it, was in the saddle, and then you ran the risk of having your horse put his foot down an old prairie dog burrow, fall and break both your necks. If that'd happen to Miz Lewis, you know I'd be looking down the barrel of a murder charge.

But the lady insisted. I guess she trusted me not to kill her, but she didn't trust me not to lie to her. Because that was what she thought I'd done, soon as I could stop crying like a baby and tell her all about Cordie.

"That has got to be the biggest load of bull I've ever heard," she declared.

"You don't know the half," I told her.

"If you expect me to believe that unspeakable lie for one solitary instant, you're a bigger fool than I imagined. It's — why, it's not merely improbable, it's *impossible.*"

"Yes'm," I said. "But it's true anyhow. I'd be pleased to have the other boys tell you so."

"Why should I believe them any more than you? Just because you turned on the waterworks? Is *that* supposed to convince me of anything?"

"Miz Lewis, if you wasn't from back East you'd know that when a man of my age and occupation is reduced to tears, it's something big. I realize that the New York men you're used to, they cry at the drop of a stock option, but the way I hear it, they're about as much kin to actual men as tofu is to sirloin. Now here in Texas — "

"Get horses," she interrupted.

"Beg pardon?"

"I said have a pair of horses saddled up and ready to go before sunrise tomorrow. I don't need to hear any more about your views on Texas *or* New York City — where, by the way, real men *do* cry, they can't help it that they're all gay. I am calling your bluff, sir. What you've told me about this so-called son of yours, this — this Cordie-person, goes beyond ludicrous. Why, even if it were true — "

That was when I left, sooner than have to hear her go on any more about what a bald-face liar I was. A man hears a thing like that too much, just before he's about to take a woman out to a desolate stretch of country, could be he might get him some unsociable ideas no matter how good his mama raised him.

I will say this for Miz Josette Marie Lewis: She could sit a horse. She

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curled her lip some at the Western saddle, but she mounted up and rode away like a trooper. She went so far as to be dressed proper for the occasion — good, solid boots; dungarees, even if *she* called 'em "jeans"; a long-sleeved cotton shirt to keep the sun off and a bandanna at her neck to wipe away the sweat. 'Course she did wear one of them floppy straw sissy garden hats instead of a decent Stetson, but that would've been asking too much. By the time we reached Cordie's stompin' grounds the sun was up and it was blazing, but nary a peep of complaint out of her the whole way. If I didn't think the woman was poison I'd've taken a real shine to her for that.

We rode on across country that the Devil wouldn't own on a bet, 'cept Jesus made him. Only pretty thing about it was the Texas sky above, blue and bright and big enough to hold anything a man might care to dream. Finally I caught sight of the old cabin ruins. "See there?" I said, reining in my horse and pointing across the flats. "That's where we used to bunk, back when you could still pasture a few hundred head of longhorns out here."

"Longhorns?" she echoed. "How...quaint."

"Quaint enough to bring in a pretty penny when the big Hollywood studios wanted to shoot a Western. Ol' Josh P.'s daddy got the idea and he rented 'em out at a good price, you bet. Quaint enough for some hotshots off one of the other spreads to try their hand at rustling 'em, too, back in the day."

"So Fowler's grandfather stationed you boys out here to play nursie to the cows?"

"One at a time, yes'm. Couldn't spare more'n that from regular ranch work."

"Why did he stop? The bottom fall out of the oater market?"

"No'm." I cleared my throat. Even after all these years I still did not feel entirely comfortable in admitting to what had happened to me out here, what had put an end to a man riding solitary longhorn patrol. Oh, I know I'd already told her all about it, but she didn't believe it. That made it sort of like it'd never happened. Lord knows I often wished it had not, though I took back that selfish thought every time I laid eyes on my son, but still —

"Well, now," I said, talking slow, so as to put off the inevitable. "Well, the way it is, we do still raise longhorns on this acreage — not as many as

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in the good ol' days 'cause the land can't support 'em — only for about the past twenty-five years we ain't stood in need of keeping one of the ranch hands out here. You don't know how hard it was, back then, for a man on his lonesome. It don't matter how many supplies he's got to live on or how much whiskey, he still needs a little...companionship. It's only human. Ol' Josh P.'s daddy, he was a good boss, but there was two things about him that rile me to this day: He expected his orders to be obeyed, no matter what, and he had a tendency to be forgetful. So when he told me I was s'posed to stay out here and mind the cattle and not come back until I was sent for, I did like I was told. Hell, I was young and eager to please and the only time I ever thought to question authority was to ask 'How high?' when my boss told me to jump. But when he proceeded to forget all about sending for me within what any decent soul would consider to be a reasonable length of time — namely one full calendar year, by God — that was when I got so lonely that one night I drunk myself stupid and went out onto the range and I proceeded to — "

"What's that?" Miz Lewis asked, pointing at the horizon. I had the feeling she'd only been half-listening to me and this proved it, her interrupting me like that. It was rude by anybody's standards, even Easterners'.

I tugged the brim of my Stetson down some and peered into the distance where a fair-sized cloud of dust was rising. "That'll be the reason no one else has to endure what I endured that long, lonesome year," I said, solemn. "That'll be my boy Cordie. He always seems to know when I'm here."

We heard the sound of hoofbeats soon after we got our first sight of that approaching dust cloud. They filled the sky above us like thunder. The wind shifted and we caught the smell of cattle along with something extra, something special, something downright out of the ordinary. I knew to expect it, so I held my horse on a tight rein, but Miz Lewis lacked my experience and her horse shied like a mad thing. She tried to regain control, only she was a little late. The smell was just too unnatural for the poor critter and it reacted to her pull on the reins by leaping straight up into the air and shaking itself like a wet hound on the way down. My worst fears came to pass: Miz Lewis went flying from the saddle, her skull heading right for a date with one of the half-tumbled walls from the ruined cabin.

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God bless my son Cordie.

That boy was speed personified, and that's a fact. One minute he was a dot on the horizon, the next he was right there, arms outstretched just like some kind of superhero come to save the day. He scooped the lady out of midair and hugged her to his bosom before she even had the time to utter a scream. I could not help but tear off my hat and wave it in the air, letting loose with a war whoop to see how slick he did it. Cordie blushed and pretended I wasn't there, just like he always done when he was a teenager.

"Ma'am," he said to Miz Lewis, polite like I taught him. That floppy garden hat of hers had fallen over her face when he snatched her up, so he pushed it back for her real gentle and asked: "You all right?"

The woman was a study, I'll tell you what. Her hair under the sissy hat was sticking out every whichaway, her eyes were wide with fear, her limbs a-tremble. She had both arms wrapped tight around my son's neck and she huddled up against his chest so snug I expected she'd leave a mark if we could ever pry her loose again. She gazed up into his big brown eyes, which were just as soft and sweet and inviting as his mama's, and he gave her a smile that could've melted stone.

And it did, too. I never did see a woman go from being a chip of flint with legs to a natural gal that fast. Not without she'd been reading romance novels. "You — you saved my life," she breathed.

"Aw, shucks," said Cordie, cradling her with one arm, the better to show off his strength for the lady. "'Twaren't nothin'."

That was when he tilted back his Stetson to wipe the sweat from his brow.

That was when she saw the horns.

That was also about when she looked down and noticed that while Cordie was at the proper height from the ground for a mounted man, he was not mounted on anything. Anything 'cept his ownself. From the waist up my son was all man — almost all, if you're willing to overlook a pair of pretty considerable horns sprouting off his forehead — but from the waist down, well....

"You're a *cow!*" Miz Lewis shrieked.

Cordie looked hurt. "Bull, ma'am," he said.

But she wasn't listening. Again. She was squirming and kicking and pounding on my son's chest like it was a busted vending machine. The fact

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that he had just saved her life was forgotten. And the whole time she struggled to break free of him she was screaming, "No, no, no! This can't be! This isn't happening! It's hideous, it's unnatural, it's *wrong!* Let me go, you monster! Let me *go!*"

My poor son. It would've broke your heart to see how deep that harpy's ugly words wounded him. He always was the sweetest thing, friendly, living by the Golden Rule and believing with all his innocent heart that everybody else in this wicked world was doing the same. (He showed no mercy when he played poker with the boys, maybe even cheated some, according to Jim, but no one's perfect.) He'd've been within his rights to drop her — right smack on her thick head, for preference — but I'd raised him too chivalrous. He set her down gentle on her feet and backed away.

This was not enough to satisfy that odious woman. She looked this way and that, desperate as a cornered rat, until her eyes lit on some of the rocks from the cabin's fallen chimney. Before I could stop her she'd picked up one in either hand and flang 'em at my boy. Cordie saw 'em coming and turned so they only hit him on the flank. Why he did not turn tail and run I don't know. Could be it was 'counta I was there and he didn't want to have his daddy think he was a coward. They was good-sized rocks, big enough to raise puffs of dust where they struck his tawny hide. They must've hurt him when they hit, but he never did more than snort and back a little farther away from that lunatic female.

When she bent down to lay hands on a second set of rocks, I'd had a bellyful. I forced my horse between her and Cordie, saying: "Miz Lewis, you leave my son be."

"Your *son*," she repeated. Then she tossed her head back and cackled. "And here I thought you were just making some sort of hideous joke."

"No'm, I was not," I said, feeling my fingers curl and wishing I might be able to wrap them around her scrawny neck some, as a moral lesson. "His Christian name's Cordero Custis Redburn and he's the reason you can't sell the Cottonwood. This is the only home the boy's ever known. This is where he's got his roots, his work, his future."

Again she let fly with that witchy laugh. "Here or with Barnum and Bailey! So this is your precious 'kinfolk'? This is the reason you wanted to call my sweet nephew's legitimacy into question? To shelter a *monstrosity*?

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Dear God, I don't know whether to notify the *National Enquirer*, Jerry Springer, or Swift's Premium Meats!"

I realize now that she didn't mean what she was saying. She'd had a shock, a bad one, and it was only natural for her to go a little crazy after. She wasn't a bad person, just an Easterner. I reckon they're like fleas, and if God can put up with so many of 'em, we Texans should try to do our part.

But I wasn't exactly thinking straight myself, right then. All I knew was that this woman was meanmouthing my Cordie something brutal, and I wasn't about to stand for it. I hadn't been the best of fathers — hadn't even known there *was* a Cordie until those first reports started drifting back to the bunkhouse from the ranch hands who went out to mind the longhorns after me — but once I knew he existed I'd done what I could for him. I cut him out of the herd. I taught him to talk. I got him dressed up as decent as possible, even though pants was out of the question. I educated him to read and write and cipher. I gave him the same lessons in manners that my mama gave me. I even traveled all the way to Dallas to fetch back a blind minister so's he could be baptized, all right and proper. (The heavens didn't come tumbling down when we done it, so I reckon God didn't mind.) And I'd never once turned my back on him; never. Blood is blood. Kin is kin.

Unfortunately, Easterners are Easterners.

"This cannot go on!" Miz Lewis decreed. "What if little Fowler were to hear of it? What would he think? What horrid, horrid questions might he ask? I can't risk it. I *will* not abide it. *You* — " She leveled a finger at my Cordie. "I will have you removed from this property at once, today, and placed in the hands of the scientific authorities where you belong."

"Yes'm," was all Cordie could reply. My sweet son sounded ready to die from misery.

I could feel the blood throbbing in my head, turning my eyesight crimson every time I looked at that devil-woman. "The hell you will!" I bawled at her. "Scientific authorities, my withered ass! You just want to sell my boy to the highest bidder. You don't care do they cut him up for study or keep him in a pen for staring at or grind him down for dog food! Well, I *do*. You hurt him and I'll serve your sickly runt of a nephew the same way. I will run you down where you stand. You even *think* of saying

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one word about him to anyone who's not kin or Cottonwood and we will all band together and swear that you're crazy!"

The woman drew herself up as tall as possible. "You wouldn't *dare*." Het up like she was, her true nature blazed through all the layers of prim-and-proper dowdiness she'd wrapped around herself. It even overcame that stupid hat. She was proud and brave and defiant and even noble, in a wrongheaded way. I recollect thinking *Get a little high spirits in that'n makes her downright pretty*, though to tell the truth those thoughts were not in the forefront of my mind at the time.

No sir, right then my main, my *only* concern was Cordie, and that was where I made my big mistake. See, I decided that small as she was, and unarmed, and out in the middle of nowhere, what could a mere woman do to me? I reckoned she was pretty much defanged, so I turned my head away from her and looked to Cordie. It was a pity how bad he was taking her ravings. A big, strapping, healthy cuss like him, with his daddy's good looks (Folks have said I bore more than a passing resemblance to Randolph Scott in my younger days) and his mama's sweet temper, and here was that Eastern hellcat, that New York shrew, that pick-of-the-Vassar-litter, that — that — that *woman* making him feel like he was some sort of monster. My Cordie was no monster. I have been to war and to Washington D.C. and let me tell you, I *know* monsters.

But I did not know women. I never imagined what a particularly spunky member of that species is capable of. While I was distracted by my boy's sorrow, she came up on my left side, grabbed my arm, and yanked me clean out of the saddle. I hadn't barely hit the dirt before she was mounted up, the reins in her hands.

"Mr. Redburn, I am going to fetch the authorities!" she announced. "By the time you make it back to civilization, the Cottonwood will be crawling with officers of the law, federal agents, and gentlemen of the press."

I spat out a mouthful of Texas and said, "Think you'll tell 'em about Cordie and they'll come? They'll never believe you! You wouldn't believe *me* when I first told you!"

She laughed. My horse, not used to a stranger in the saddle, did a little sideways dance but she forced him to mind. "Do you believe I'd tell them the *real* story right away? I'm no fool. My plan is to hide Fowler

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somewhere and report that the child wandered off, or fell down an old, abandoned well shaft or — or — " A hellish gleam came into her eye. " — or that one Cordero Custis Redburn kidnapped him! *That'll* bring them, and then — "

Well, we never did find out *what* then, because whatever it was, it couldn't keep my horse under control worth a damn. What with Cordie's particular scent and having me yanked out of his saddle and replaced by that fractious, shrill female, the poor, put-upon thing couldn't take no more. He didn't give any warning, didn't buck, he just bolted. Yes sir, he took off at speed for the great wide open, with Miz Josette Marie Lewis clinging to his back, shrieking like an ambulance siren.

Which, of course, only served all the more to encourage him to beat the land speed record in an attempt to get the hell away from whatever was making that ungodly racket so near his ears.

I picked myself up off the ground. "Stupid woman," I grumbled as I brushed dirt off my dungarees. "Stupid horse. Good riddance to the both of 'em."

Cordie's hand fell on my shoulder. "Come on, Pa," he said. "You can ride me until we find the first horse — the one that throwed her — and then you can mount up proper. If we hurry, I bet we can catch up to her before anything bad happens."

"Boy, are you crazy?" I barked. I picked up her fool hat, which had gone flying off when my horse ran off with her, and I waved it under my son's nose while I spoke. "Didn't you hear what that gorgon said? You understand what she has in mind for you? Let the Devil look after his own. There's a big ol' abandoned prairie dog town off the way she's headed. Plenty of holes, plenty of opportunities, if you get my drift. If we're lucky, my horse won't break his neck at the same time he breaks hers."

It was a cruel thing to say, unnatural cruel, but godammit, that woman got me *mad*. Cordie was not used to hearing me talk so inhuman. He blinked at me a couple times, looking about as horrorstruck as an honest man confronted by the personified vengeance of God which some folks call "lite" beer. Without another word he whirled around, tail held high, and took off with hooves flying, hell-for-leather after that Eastern gal.

I watched him go. It was the first time I ever realized that just because a child is flesh of your flesh and bone of your bone, that don't mean he's

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gonna pay you any mind when it don't suit him. I shook my head sadly and tossed the lady's hat into the ruins of the old cabin. After that there wasn't nothing I could do but track down Miz Lewis's original mount, which was not too difficult, and ride back to the ranch house alone.

By the time I got back it was past nightfall. Mr. Purvis and the boys was gathered out in front of the big house with little Josh riding Angel's shoulders. The men looked worried, but the boy was chipper enough. I reckon they'd made up some kind of cock-and-bull story about his missing kin so's he wouldn't fret.

"Where's Josette?" he asked.

I took a deep breath, "Son, your auntie's out having herself a complete tour of the Cottonwood," I said. "She'll be back when it suits her." I gave Angel a look. His mama didn't raise no dumb kids; he understood he had to get little Josh out of the way so I could speak to the men honest.

"What do you say you come with me out to the barn, *amiguito*?" he asked the boy. "Go spend some more time with that pinto pony we was playing with before."

"Sure, Angel, I'd like that," little Josh said, just as natural. "And can I try riding him tomorrow?"

"I'd be pleased if you would." Angel grinned. He did have a fondness for children. "Tell you what, you get up early enough and I'll even let you come down to the bunkhouse and join us for breakfast, maybe even have yourself a real man's cup of coffee."

"Wow!" Little Josh's eyes got that wide. "Cool! I didn't know you had a Starbuck's around here."

"A what?" asked Angel.

"Can I have a *latté*? Mocha java? With a chocolate *biscotto*? Please, can I, please, huh, please? I promise not to get hyperactive, honest."

Angel led him off to the barn looking like a man who's just adopted hisself a baby Martian. Even with the boy still talking so's only another Easterner could follow, it was a pure joy to see how much better little Josh looked than he'd done when he first arrived at the Cottonwood. Robust. Thriving. More like he was actual blood-kin to the man who was supposed to have sired him.

A good dose of Texas: It does work miracles.

Soon as Angel had little Josh out of the way, I told the rest of the boys

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what had happened. Some of them had the bad taste to cheer, but Mr. Purvis shook his head and looked grave.

"We can't leave it like this, boys, and you all know it," he said. "That woman may have no other kin than that man-child, but she's got lawyers. You know they won't let her simply disappear, no matter how pleasant or convenient that might be. They'll *habeas* the living hell out of all our sorry *corpuses* until they find out what happened."

We knew him to be right, no getting around it. Buck sighed. "All right, Mr. Purvis, we'll saddle up and go looking for her body come morning." Everyone agreed we'd keep the news from the boy until there was something definite, and on that depressing note we all turned in for the night.

Well, we rode the Cottonwood spread for the best part of five whole days, searching, and we didn't find a damn thing. No sign of Miz Lewis, no sign of Cordie. There'd been a squall of rain out over the western acreage, so we couldn't even track 'em. At first I was some concerned about keeping little Josh in the dark as to his missing aunt, but when I tried to broach the subject he looked me right in the eye and said:

"Oh, I'm not worried, Mr. Redburn, sir. I know it's going to take her a long time to see the whole ranch. After all, it's Texas. Texas is big. And you know what else? It's wonderful."

I tell you what, that innocent boy's words brought a lump to my throat. "Son, Mr. Redburn was my daddy," I told him. "You can call me Sam."

"Only if you swear you'll kick the heck out of anyone who calls me Fowler," little Josh replied with a grin. He'd put on flesh, got a tan, hadn't coughed for days, was beginning to raise a prime crop of freckles, and had taken to riding that pinto pony everywhere he went, like they'd been born joined at the — Well, who'm I to say? When Lucille the cook reported that the little scamp had pinched her behind and called her *darlin'*, the boys dropped their lawsuit contesting ol' Josh P.'s will, seeing as how there wasn't nothing a DNA test was gonna tell us that Nature had not already done.

But that did not bring back the boy's aunt or my son.

It was a full week later, a day that dawned bright and clear, when Mr. Purvis announced he didn't have no more options but to call in the law. He was standing on the bunkhouse steps, telling us this, when all of a

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sudden we heard the sound of hoofbeats and our nostrils filled with that particular smell that only had one source on this whole misbegotten planet.

"Cordie!" Mitch shouted, rushing to the porch railing and leaning out to greet the approaching cloud of dust. We all crowded up behind him for a good view, most of the boys yipping for joy like a pack of coyotes.

Cordie and Miz Lewis came riding up to the front of the bunkhouse all brisk and smiling, just like the past week hadn't happened. She was sitting him astraddle with his Stetson perched on her head, both her boots missing, likewise one leg of her "jeans" and most of her shirt. I have seen pack-rat nests neater than her hair and old saddles less brown and beat-up than her skin, but I have never, as God is my witness, ever seen a smile that wide on another human being's face before or since.

Less'n you want to count Cordie's. Of course when a man is wearing a lady's brassiere where he by rights should be wearing his bandanna, I reckon he's got what to smile about.

The way Cordie told it afterwards, he'd caught up to her before my horse could throw her, snatching her out of the saddle to safety. This time she *did* realize how isolated and helpless she was, so she begged his pardon for all the mean things she'd said and asked him could he get her back to the ranch house, real polite.

Well, he wasn't one to hold a grudge, 'specially against a lady, so Cordie agreed. But my horse's run for the border had brought them even deeper into the middle of nowhere than the ruined cabin, most nearly up to the foothills of what ol' Josh P. used to call the Pissant Mountains. (I don't know how they're labeled on the gov'ment maps, but they ain't much by Texas standards so for all of us Cottonwood ranch hands the Pissant Mountains they remain.)

"He was *wonderful*," Miz Lewis gushed, eating up Cordie with her eyes. "There we were, stranded in the wilderness, night coming on, the air turning chill, wild beasts howling all around us."

"Coyote," Cordie said, blushing. "Just the one."

Miz Lewis was not about to allow him his modesty. "It was wolves," she insisted. "Ferocious, man-eating wolves, a hundred or more. I *heard* them." She tilted back her head and did us a creditable imitation of an asthmatic senior citizen coyote. We all agreed it was wolves. "*He* wasn't

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afraid, not for an instant," she went on. "He carried me into the foothills where there was a cave he knew. He built us a fire, he hunted down some game birds for our dinner and then, afterwards, he — he — Well, we got to talking." She batted her eyelashes at him, then turned to me and purred, "Mr. Redburn, your son is a *fascinating* conversationalist."

Is that what they're calling it back East these days? Alone together in a foothill cave for seven whole, uninterrupted days of...conversation? I looked at Cordie, still with that woman's brassiere around his neck. He had the good grace to blush, lower his eyes, and paw the ground. The other fellers began to snicker, but Mr. Purvis soon put a stop to that.

"Lady says they talked, then that's what they did," he barked. "*All* they did. Savvy?"

We savvied.

Miz Lewis and Cordie got married soon thereafter, by the same blind minister as had baptized my boy. Like me, he was getting on in years, but he was right proud we'd thought enough of him to fetch him all the way from Dallas to perform the wedding.

Seeing as how fine Texas was agreeing with her nephew as well as with her ownself, Miz Lewis — I mean Miz Redburn — dropped all plans to sell off the Cottonwood. It was the best damn decision that woman ever made. Little Josh continued to thrive and flourish to the point where he no longer needed me to lick anyone who tried to calling him by his sissified Eastern name. As far as handing out whoopass went, the boy became an autonomous economic entity, like CNN would say.

I finally retired a few years later and moved in with Cordie and his bride when they insisted. Me and the boys had rebuilt the old cabin for them because Cordie liked living out on the range and it gave their kids room to run free. They were a wild bunch, and for obvious reasons it never did do their mama one lick of good to yell at them to close the door, was they born in a barn.

I was sitting on the cabin porch one evening, watching the shadows pull out long, when I saw little Josh come riding up to the place. He wasn't so little no more, and the pinto pony'd been retired in favor of a big roan stallion.

"Sam! Hey, Sam!" he shouted, waving his Stetson with one hand as

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he reined his horse to a halt with the other. "Guess what? I just got the word: I've been accepted to college!"

"Vassar?" I asked, a twinkle in my eye.

He made a face. "Hell, no. I'm going somewhere with some *class*."

"And where might that be, son?"

"Texas A&M." He was prouder'n a possum in a tuxedo.

"Well, that's fine, son, fine as silk. I bet your kinfolk will be just as pleased as I am with the news."

"They're the reason I'm doing this, Sam," little Josh said. All at once he looked about ten years older than he was, a growed man with a growed man's sense of his responsibilities. "To make my kinfolk proud. You think I'd leave the Cottonwood otherwise? Auntie Jo says that an educated man could take care of his family better than an ignorant one, and Uncle Cordie never does stop telling me how much he regrets not being able to get an education. He says he probably could've learned a thing or two at college that'd've helped make the Cottonwood a real success instead of just squeaking by. So I'm doing it for her, and for him, and for all of my cousins, and even for my poor, dead daddy who left me this place. But most of all, Sam, I'm doing it for *Texas*."

He gazed out over the land, and the look of pure love I saw on his face made me realize that he wasn't seeing the waste and the desolation an Easterner would claim to see. No sir, when he set an eye to the sagebrush and the clumps of buffalo grass, the lonely mesquite trees and the prairie dog towns and the bumbling 'dillos and the only silence big enough to let a man think without commercial interruption, he saw what I saw: He saw home.

I wiped away a tear of pride and joy, hoping he hadn't seen that. "What're you gonna study, little Josh?" I asked. "Economics? Business? Agriculture?"

He puffed out his chest, and in that moment it was like I could see the great Lone Star State flag flying proud and glorious behind him as he opened his mouth and said: "Animal husbandry."

You know, there are some things that you just can't blame on the Democrats.

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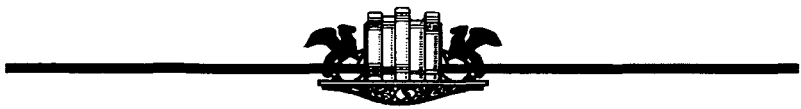

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Swim the Moon, by Paul Brandon, Tor Books, 2001, $25.95.

AFTER THE death of his wife, Richard Brennan exiled himself from his native Scotland to live in Australia. There he remained for six years until, at the beginning of *Swim the Moon*, the funeral of his father finally brings him back. He doesn't mean to stay but old ghosts have him set up house in his father's lonely cottage in the north of Scotland. The cottage is near the sea where Brennan lost his wife, where his father went strange, and where Brennan meets a mysterious woman named Ailish.

From that point on, the novel takes Brennan into dangerous territory. For the more he pursues the mystery of this woman, singing on the beach in all kinds of weather, disappearing and reappearing in a heartbeat, the closer he comes to the dark history of his own family. And the more he seems set to repeat the past mistakes of his father.

This is a wonderful novel. It deals with some traditional motifs, to be certain, but it's what Brandon does with them that makes the book sing. And that musical reference is a good touchstone word.

Brandon's character plays the fiddle. Brandon himself is a successful Celtic guitarist in Australia where he lives. You can tell that he knows his music, not simply from the way music arises so naturally in the text, but also in the ebb and flow of his prose. A good writer almost scores how the story will unfold, always staying in control of its rhythms and pace. Brandon knows this and it shows.

But it's also obvious that he pays attention to everything. His writing is filled with a deep sense of place and character, and subtle insights into why people do the things that they do. When he writes of the coast, a storm, a music session, or an intimate conversation, you can

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smell the salt, feel the rain, hear the fiddles, and be aware of every nuance of body movement and dialogue.

And then there's the magic — wild, unpredictable, heart-grabbing magic that will make you weep and make you smile.

With just one book, Brandon has become one of my favorite new authors. He has a voice that captured me from the first page and he never betrayed that trust in the time it took me to reach the last one.

The Song of Taliesin: Tales from King Arthur's Bard, by John Matthews, Quest Books, 2001, $19.95.

Because I once used the mythological/historical figure of Taliesin as a character in one of my books (*Moonheart*), I often got, and still get, letters from readers asking where they can find out more about him. I used to direct them to the usual sources: *The Mabinogion* and Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, the two books in which I started my own research journeys. Now with the publication of John Matthew's *The Song of Taliesin*, I've got one book to which I can point them.

Matthews has a done a tremendous job of collecting the various histories, myths, and poetry associated with Taliesin, shaping them into a single narrative that helps make sense of the various, sometimes contradictory, often fragmentary, source material surrounding the bard, but loses none of the mystery and power of his verses and story.

It helps that Matthews has the tongue of a poet himself. The lovely pencil illustrations by Stuart Littlejohn scattered throughout the text don't hurt either. I also liked the framing device of having the story told by a fictitious scribe (done to avoid the need for footnotes), and I particularly enjoyed the opening chapter, which briefly provides this scribe's own history.

For those still hungry to know more, the book provides a comprehensive bibliography of further material relating to the bard, Wales, Arthurian Matter, and beyond.

I should probably add, in the spirit of helpfulness for those interested in this sort of reference material, that this year Quest Books also published another book by Matthews: *The Quest for the Green Man*, a hardcover, profusely illustrated study of the nature spirit with informative, engaging text, and an even more comprehensive bibliography.

Both books are highly recommended.

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The Essential Ellison, by Harlan Ellison, Morpheus International, 2001, $34.95.

I doubt that any reader of this magazine needs me to tell them that Harlan Ellison is one of the masters of short fiction. Sure, he's written the odd clunker, but when you look at the overall body of his work, those clunkers barely register on a percentage scale. The man is *good*.

So if you don't own this collection, you really owe it to yourself to get a copy. Behind its striking cover by the Dillons is a wealth of classic stories, authorial reminiscences, and essays, all delivered in Ellison's inimitable style.

But, you say, I already have this book. I bought it back in 1987 when it was published by The Nemo Press.

Well, you did and you didn't. That was a thirty-five-year retrospective. Ellison's now been writing for more than fifty years (god bless him) and the new volume is a fifty-year retrospective, with a new introduction and enough additional material to make it a few hundred pages longer.

Simply put, every library needs a copy of this book on its shelves.

Ginger Snaps, DVD, Live/Artisan, 2001, $19.98.

I'm not going to make a habit of discussing movies here. For one thing, this is a book column. For another, I don't particularly like most films that are marketed as fantasy and horror, so I don't watch them, never mind consider reviewing them.

(I say "marketed," by the way, because I've noticed an interesting phenomenon in film over the past few decades: a huge proportion of movies have fantasy as one of their principal underpinnings — think *The Family Man*, *Liar, Liar*, and the like — but that aspect is completely downplayed in the marketing.)

The reason I don't like films marketed as in our genre is that they so rarely get it right. They either play the cast and story for slapstick laughs, or the effects take over from the plotting and character growth, or — in the case of horror — they simply go for the gross-out, or a pornography of violence that simply doesn't interest me.

But I'm making an exception here because, while this is a book column, one of the things I tend to concentrate on — one of the real *strengths* of genre fiction — is Story, and this film is not just strong on that front, it excels.

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The premise is simple. Teenage sisters Ginger (Katharine Isabelle) and Brigitte (Emily Perkins) are self-styled Goth outcasts in a nameless and utterly bland suburb. They're more than a little obsessed with death: They have a pact that they will die together; they put together school projects such as a portfolio of photos of their own faked death scenes.

While fifteen, neither has yet hit puberty. The day that Ginger (the older of the two) does is followed by a night walk in the woods where she is bitten by a werewolf. And things go very much downhill from there as the younger sister Brigitte tries to help Ginger escape from the escalating wave of darkness that threatens to reduce her to nothing more than a savage beast.

Now this could easily have gone the way of so many other horror films, but Karen Walton's script (based on an original story by herself and director John Fawcett) is so smart, the dialogue is so sharp, and the actors playing the roles of the sisters deliver such convincing performances that, even at the end of the film when it strays a bit too much into more traditional horror fare, the viewer is drawn into the story and held there until the last bittersweet scene. Even the less-than-satisfying beast design can't take away from the power of the story and how much we come to care for these characters.

I'm trying to think of touchstones, but it's hard. Perhaps a very dark, and certainly more gruesome (by the end), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *The Company of Wolves* also comes to mind. As do *Nomads* and *Wolfen*.

What I do know is that it's only very occasionally that a film like this comes around where they get it so right. Not only does *Ginger Snaps* (such a great title) do a better job of conveying the mystery and horror of the material than most movies, it also does it better than most books. And since it's a small film, without a big money machine behind it to give it the promotion it deserves, I wanted to at least tell you about it before it gets lost among all the other titles in your local video store.

Next column we'll discuss *Jesus the Vampire Slayer*. Just kidding, although the film does exist.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Year's Best SF 6, edited by David G. Hartwell, Eos, 2001, $7.50.

The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eighteenth Annual Collection, edited by Gardner Dozois, St. Martin's Griffin, 2001, $18.95.

IN "REALITY Check," a brief story by David Brin — published in the science journal *Nature* and reprinted in David Hartwell's *Year's Best SF 6* — the godlike minds of the future look back with envy at our times, when there were still so many unanswered questions, still so much work to do. Every creative enterprise offers finite possibilities, Brin tells us — "only so many eight-bar melodies can be written in any particular musical tradition" — and over time the available "invention space" gets used up. Later generations have increasingly smaller patches in which to work, and eventually there's just not much interesting left to do.

The demolitionists of Robert Silverberg's "The Millennium Express" (also included in Hartwell's volume) travel the world destroying monuments and treasures of every type: the Sistine Chapel, the Taj Mahal, the Parthenon, the Washington Monument, the sunken ruins of Istanbul. It's not that they despise the relics of earlier centuries; it's the very greatness of this cultural heritage that demands its destruction. The vandals believe that their own generation has been ruined by "the iron hand of the past," by the weight of so much accumulated achievement. "Where's today's great art?" one of them asks. "Where are our great works? It's as though our famous forebears have done it all and nothing's left for us to attempt."

As the giants of the field continue to pass into history — in 2001 Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson joined the pantheon of the departed

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— it might be tempting to wonder whether the futures imagined by Brin and Silverberg present a parable of the current state of science fiction. Some might say all the good ideas have already been used. The early masters covered most of the conceptual territory: space travel, alien planets, first contact, future war, time travel. Today's writers are left to work out variations, and the excitement of discovery has disappeared.

There may be a little truth to this. Certainly it's a different proposition to write in a well-established tradition than to carve that territory out of the literary wilderness. It's a lot harder now to get away with stories that offer little more than a neat concept. But the fact that most of the sf landscape has been mapped, at least on a large scale, need not leave us in the despair of Brin's all-knowing ennuists. Pioneering days may be gone, but the invention space has hardly been exhausted.

Indeed, the work in sf today may well outshine its rougher antecedents. What we lose in great leaps of invention we gain in richness and complexity, as writers dig into the implications of the ideas glimpsed by their predecessors. Time travel is no longer news, but its convolutions can still fuel a hundred — or a thousand, or ten thousand — wonderful stories.

The vigor of sf is abundantly clear in both Hartwell's *Year's Best SF 6* and Gardner Dozois's *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Eighteenth Annual Collection*. Despite — or thanks to — divergent aesthetics, these two volumes reveal a thriving literary ecosystem. Sf continues to shift and evolve; it becomes ever more diverse in tone, style, and substance; yet it retains its ties to its ancestors, just as our own cells recall the shapes of their lonely progenitors a billion years gone.

The selections in Hartwell's volume favor that phylum of sf that emphasizes ideas over other fictive values. Hartwell includes seven pieces from *Nature*'s series of short-short stories, and few of them — as Hartwell acknowledges — work very well as stories in the usual sense. They're thought-pieces, sf notions presented using the devices of fiction. They're certainly good for a quick kick of science-fictional thinking, but they're sf with every other literary pleasure boiled away.

Some of Hartwell's remaining selections demonstrate that today's sf can still be heavy on concept without ignoring other dimensions

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of storytelling, none more compellingly than Ted Chiang's novella "Seventy-Two Letters." As he did in his Nebula-winning first published story, "Tower of Babylon," Chiang gives us a world in which the erroneous scientific notions of a past era are instead correct, and he develops the implications in delightfully convincing detail. In "Seventy-Two Letters," cabbalistic magic — the stuff that brought the Golem of Prague to life — combines with medieval biological theory to create an alternate Industrial Revolution and a weird shadow of genetics. Chiang conjures some wonderful images — factories powered by tireless ceramic statues, children playing with mini-golems like wind-up toys — but it's the rigor with which he has worked out the rules of this other science that amazes and amuses most. Next time you hear someone complain that there are no new ideas in sf anymore, hand 'em "Seventy-Two Letters" and a plate of crow.

Not every idea-focused story here produces as vivid a world as Chiang's, but they're all stimulating in their own ways. Brian Stableford's "The Last Supper" imagines dinner at the haute cuisine establishment of the genetically modified future, with sharp wit and a coolly analytical courtship driving the tale. "Different Kinds of Darkness" by David Langford involves mathematical patterns that can kill on sight (think of Monty Python's "killer joke" without the laughs), and the school kids who make an initiation rite out of enduring them. In "Sheena 5," Stephen Baxter proposes squid as the Earth creature best adapted for space travel, and humans perhaps little more than the engine of their uplift.

Greg Egan's "Oracle" is an idea story of a different order. It's not the sf conceit that's on stage here — that's a pretty standard time travel scenario, with a little extra theorizing on the branchings of parallel worlds. Egan uses this familiar setup to juxtapose two characters of radically different philosophies, based on the British mathematician Alan Turing and the medievalist, fantasist, and popular theologian C. S. Lewis. It's a staged debate — at the story's crux it literally comes down to one — during which the Turing character argues for the validity and even the spiritually redemptive quality of the rational materialist worldview, while the Lewis character, wrapped in grief for his dying wife, rejects science and its seemingly miraculous works

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as lures designed to break his faith. The results aren't exactly a surprise, but the story succeeds on Egan's eloquent exposition of the opposing points of view, and on his sensitivity to the fundamental objection at the heart of most rejections of science: its powerlessness to address certain deep human concerns. By treating the anti-science arguments with a measure of respect, Egan produces a more convincing rebuttal, and a more involving story.

Hartwell makes a respectable effort to include work that covers the wider range of sf as it's written today. Stories by Howard Waldrop, Robert Reed, Ursula K. Le Guin, M. Shayne Bell, and others fall less squarely in the realm of idea-oriented SF. But the backbone of *Year's Best SF 6* remains the idea story, and that aesthetic pervades the book as a whole. Hartwell's selections reveal an sf field in close touch with its roots, with plenty of intellectual heat left in its traditional modes, but without the lush otherworldliness of Jack Vance or Cordwainer Smith.

This other strain is much better represented in Gardner Dozois's annual volume, the eighteenth incarnation of his reliable *Year's Best Science Fiction* series. This isn't to say that Dozois's book is devoid of exciting new sf notions, or new twists on old ones; but Dozois seems more interested in sf's ability to produce exotic and peculiar people, settings, and situations. For instance, "Radiant Green Star" by Lucius Shepard displays Shepard's characteristic richness of language and description as he follows a twenty-first-century circus through the Vietnamese countryside. The figure of Major Boyette, one of the circus's main attractions, will remain indelibly in the reader's mind as the sort of phantasmagoric entity only possible in SF: "the last surviving POW of the American War, now well over a hundred years old and horribly disfigured," the major crouches in his tent like an ancient oracular ape, grasping at shattered memories. The story's images, and Shepard's rolling, rhythmic prose, conjure a fascination that the plot and ideas themselves would not create.

Albert Cowdrey's "Crux" shows us a future in which an imposingly complex, highly mannered interstellar civilization has grown up in the deserts of Central Asia, centuries after the collapse of our own world. It's a heady mixture, in which the languid freelance security agent Steffens Aleksandr anaesthetizes himself with kif and dallies with the courtesan Dzunn

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at the Radiant Love House; where lawbreakers vanish into the terrible cells of the Palace of Justice; where alien Darksiders hold the guardposts and the common tongue is a doggerel of Russian, English, and a dozen other languages, called Alspeke. It almost doesn't matter what the story's about with a kaleidoscopic setting like that.

Ian McDonald draws on material much closer to home for a landscape nearly as strange in "Tendeléo's Story." Here the Africa of the very near future has been struck by mysterious alien meteorites which have proceeded to transform the terrain and everything on it in a steady, implacable expansion from the impact points. The transformed zones — called the Chaga — lie offstage for most of the story. McDonald finds plenty of gritty alien detail in the human world of Africa, as bizarre as Shepard's future Vietnam and as familiar as yesterday's front page.

Occasionally the dazzle of an exotic surface masks an otherwise sub-standard tale. "Obsidian Harvest" by Rick Cook and Ernest Hogan is a pulpy detective story taking place in a world where the Aztec drove off Cortez and his Spaniards, and Mesoamerican civilization grew to dominate the New World. As if that didn't provide enough color, South America is home here to a race of saurians, the huetlacoatl, who maintain delicate relations with humans of the north. For the most part the tongue-tying names and interesting cultural quirks offer sufficient distraction, but as the plot works itself out it descends nearly into camp. Likewise, it's only the grandiosity of the title structure of "The Great Wall of Mars" by Alastair Reynolds that redeems this otherwise choppy, uneven piece.

Dozois also displays more interest than Hartwell in the ways sf can be used to enhance or support literary purposes more commonly associated with non-genre fiction — stories in which the sf element may be faint or far from the center. Susan Palwick's "Going After Bobo" extends the current technology of implantable ID chips only a little — adding GPS tracking features — to create a world in which criminal offenders of every sort can be under surveillance at all times, and missing pets can be located by satellite. But this minor element of speculation helps Palwick develop a very moving story of family dynamics and grief, nudging reality just a bit out of kilter so that we can see things more clearly.

The aesthetic differences between Hartwell and Dozois are

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hardly all-encompassing. Several stories appear in both volumes, and some stories that only appear in one could very well have appeared in the other without skewing that collection's internal consistency. Dozois also includes Egan's "Oracle," for instance, and in his introduction he says he would likely have chosen Chiang's "Seventy-Two Letters" but that he felt it had to be defined as fantasy rather than science fiction, and that's a distinction Dozois works hard to maintain in his annual collection.

The stories that appear in both volumes tend to be among the most fully satisfying, because to appeal to each editor's aesthetic they need to work well on more than one level. "The Birthday of the World" by Ursula K. Le Guin fits very much into the honored tradition of anthropological sf, and it addresses the central sf theme of the clash between old and new, as a staid conservative alien culture struggles with internal change and the arrival of visitors from space. It's easy to see why it drew Hartwell's eye. But Le Guin's story advances as much through its narrator's emotional responses as it does through action, and that attention to subtleties of character makes it fit comfortably into Dozois's book as well.

Similarly, Paul McAuley's "Reef" offers many of the pleasures of a classic space story, set as it is amongst the asteroidal debris of the Kuiper Belt. It centers on a complex ecosystem of hardy "chemoautotrophic vacuum organisms" living in a deep chasm of a Kuiper planetoid, and this complicated ecosystem allows for plenty of scientific speculation and vivid description, as researchers dive — by remote-controlled proxy and in person — into the chasm to explore its mysteries. Again, it's not hard to see why both editors included this one.

The difference between the two aesthetics emerges most instructively in a comparison of two stories unique to their own volumes: "Built Upon the Sands of Time" by Michael Flynn in Hartwell's book, and "The Real World" by Steven Utley in Dozois's. The two pieces have similar themes, but they're radically different in tone, storytelling strategy, and emotional effect. Flynn sets his story in a bar, and laces it with the kind of beery witticisms and broad characterization you'd expect. His prose affects a wee bit o' the Irish local flavor — not poorly, but it makes the tale feel rather self-consciously told. Amidst the banter of the regulars emerges the story of a physicist

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from the local university, who lectures his barmates on how random fluctuations in the "quantum foam" can lead to sudden changes in the past — which then propagate forward through time, rewriting history in accordance with the new condition. This is how we end up with the odd lapses of memory and feelings of *jamais vu* that we usually dismiss as errors on our parts. Really, says the physicist, these are accurate memories of a past that is in the process of altering itself — fossils of a past that never was.

The physicist has been haunted by memories like this that have a distinctly more persistent cast, and he's convinced that, in a previous past, he discovered a way to cause such quantum disruptions, and that he did so in a fit of unhappiness with his marriage — thereby undoing that marriage, and the child born to it, leaving him in his bachelor state with ghostly memories of the history that wasn't.

Utley's story follows a scientist, Ivan Kelly, a specialist in ancient soils, on a visit to his screenwriter brother in Hollywood. Kelly was one of the first people to cross through a portal into what appears to be Earth during the Silurian age, many millions of years before the dinosaurs. And that trip has left him with an unsettling legacy. All the theorists examining the portal explained that the other side couldn't be the *actual* Silurian period on the *actual* Earth; travel into the past is impossible, so this must be a parallel world of some kind, so far indistinguishable from the Earth as it existed 400 million years before.

The problem is that, if the portal links parallel worlds differing perhaps only in some infinitely tiny detail, how can you be sure that the Earth you come back to is really the same Earth that you left? Since he's returned, Kelly has become increasingly worried that he's not in the same universe from which he departed. But he can't be sure. Unless the differences were big and obvious, how would he know? So he's growing detached, feeling alienated, but unable even to be sure if his notion is correct.

Both stories present time travel scenarios (time tinkering, perhaps, in Flynn's case) that leave the traveler or tinkerer cut off from his own past — stuck in a world he believes is not the one he left, but unable due to the uncertainties inherent in the process to ever know if his inkling is correct. But that's as far as the similarities go. Flynn's story focuses on the concept, even to the point of inserting simple diagrams to illustrate the physicist's point.

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The bar setting, the joking of the listeners, and the punchline ending — effective as it is — take the focus away from the emotional significance of the physicist's situation. Utley, on the other hand, takes care to describe his scenario with some technical precision, but he keeps his attention on the inner life of the central character. Even the humorous bits — Kelly attends a Hollywood party with his brother, where things are as surreal as any reader would expect — add to the feeling of unreality surrounding Kelly. Where Flynn tells his story in broad strokes, Utley chooses subtle details. Both of them are well-crafted and effective — though for my money I prefer the Utley, which leaves a stronger presence in the mind — and they're both clearly sf, but they occupy spots on distant branches of the family tree.

This is where we can see the strength of sf as a literary genre — or genera, to preserve the biological metaphor. We're not facing the exhaustion of the invention space, the closing of the frontier. Instead, more of it is available today than at any previous time, because exploring the space means carving a path. Every big idea that comes along — alternate history, say, or terraforming — opens up a new niche, and dozens of new branches can grow into it where none had been before. In Hartwell's *Year's Best SF 6*, we can see how the family lines of traditional sf continue to flower today, and in Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction* we can see how new species have sprung up over the years, new ways of using sf that could never have been had the pioneers not blazed some trails first.

Dozois's lengthy introduction — his annual "summation" of events in the field — raises some familiar but worrisome issues. Magazine circulations continue to shrink; some publications close up altogether; online venues for short sf have yet to demonstrate any financial legs. Only time can tell what the future holds for the sf short story. But we can be sure, from the work gathered in these best-of-the-year volumes, that the gene pool is healthy and diverse, and that gives any organism a good shot at survival.

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Herewith the wise Mr. Disch—he who knows from brave toasters, not to mention biblical tongues—treats our young millennium to three parables that will help you learn about the birds, if not the bees.

Torah! Torah! Torah!

Three Bible Tales for the Third Millennium

By Thomas M. Disch

I
The Naming of the Birds

BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN there were very few words, and for a good reason. There was nothing to look at, nothing to listen to, nothing to talk about.

Gradually things improved. God created light, so you could see what was there beyond the darkness on the face of the deep. The light was called Day and the darkness, which was now limited to the hours after six o'clock, was called Night.

Once there was some light it became obvious just how big a mess the universe was in, with no clear distinction between up and down, or left and right. The sky and the sea and the land were all jumbled up in one big smoosh. God, who is basically very neat, didn't like that at all, so he untangled it into separate areas of sky, where there would be room for the Sun and the Moon and the stars, water, and land. Things started to make sense after that.

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Then God filled the oceans and rivers and other bodies of water with all kinds of fish, including whales, although whales aren't fish, strictly speaking, but mammals like us. And he made birds to fly around in the sky.

Then came the animals, lots of them, more than you'll ever see in any zoo. Most of the animals had legs, but there were some without, and all of them — the fish, the birds, the animals — were able to make more creatures just like themselves, which is what God had told them to do: Multiply.

So all the animals paired up. Each pair of two animals multiplied themselves, so then there were four, and those four multiplied themselves, and there were eight, because two times four is eight, and so on, until in a very short time — a short time back then might be millions of years — all the continents and islands and peninsulas were filled with animals, and likewise the oceans and lakes with fish, and the air with birds.

Millions and billions of them all over the place — and none of them had names!

Not just personal names, such as your dog or cat might have — Browny, or Princess, or Catamaran — but the basic name that explains what kind of animal each one is, like dog or cat or rhinoceros. You couldn't point at a cow out in the field and say, "Look at that cow," because the word "cow," which *we* all take for granted, just didn't exist.

For the animals themselves that might not have mattered so much, since animals don't talk to each other, except with snarls and barks and whines, and fish are even less given to conversation, except for whales, who *do* talk to each other and who, unlike everyone else in the ocean, did have their own name. They were whales right from the start, and so an exception to the rule and not really part of this story.

But the birds didn't have names, and birds can be very talkative, so they *wanted* names. Nice names that would set one flock apart from the others. Names they could preen like their feathers. Names that would make someone stop and think and maybe smile and feel friendly toward the bird that bore such a sweet name. And also, thinking ahead (for birds, because they can fly, often see into the future), names that might be used at some later time in a poem or a song. For just the way that flowers love to be in pictures, birds love to be in songs.

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Having foreseen the possibility of poetry, the birds were not altogether surprised when God formed Adam out of the dust of the Earth and breathed some life into him. He was a person, and it would be people like him who would someday write the poems the birds might appear in.

Because he was the first human being ever, Adam didn't have to go to school. He was born a grownup, with no one to tell him when to get up or to go to bed, or what to eat for breakfast or dinner, except for one kind of fruit that he had to avoid. But that is a story all on its own, which we won't go into here. This story is about how Adam named all the birds in the Garden of Eden, where he lived at that time.

Naming the animals and birds was the first job that God asked Adam to do, and he had to do it entirely on his own, because Eve, who would later be his wife, didn't exist yet. He had no one he could talk with but God himself, and God said the naming would be up to Adam entirely.

"There they are," said God, with a broad gesture toward the field full of beasts that had assembled for their naming. "Name them."

"Anything at all?"

"Whatever you decide. But try to make each name appropriate. The names will stick, and all these animals will have to live with the names you give them for hundreds of years."

"Okay," said Adam. He looked at the animals who had come nearest to where he and God were standing. "That's a dog. And that's a cat. And that little one is a mouse." He noticed that there was a pair of them, and that they were both cute little things, so he made a correction: "Two mice."

God smiled at the embellishment, and Adam, encouraged, turned toward the largest animals close at hand, and said, "That's an ox, and *they* are oxen."

The oxen looked at each other askance and lowered their heads, as though embarrassed. It was too late for Adam to change his mind, but after that he was more sparing in meting out peculiar plurals.

There were even more kinds of animals then than there are now, because many of them would soon drown in the great flood God had planned for the future, as a punishment for all the violence in the world. So Adam had to name all the different kinds of dinosaurs, as well as shaggy mammoths and saber-tooth tigers and other mammals now extinct.

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It took a long time to take care of all the animals, and Adam came up with some quite fanciful names once he got going.

There was the pika and the platypus, the zebu and the stoat. The chameleon and the anaconda. The panda and the peccary, and all kinds of great names for the various tribes of apes and monkeys.

The wallaby.

The walrus.

The yak.

The gnu was the very last animal to be named, and when he'd named the gnu, and the field was empty at last of all the assembled beasts — except for the dog, who kept bringing Adam a slobbery old stick, wanting him to toss it — Adam thought, "I could use a day of rest myself."

God could read his thoughts, and said, "The birds are next."

The minute God said that the sky filled with birds of all shapes and colors and sizes, all of them anxious to be named and to begin to have their own unique identities the way the animals now did. From their aerial vantage they could see mountain goats springing from crag to crag, and sloths drooping from treelimbs like clothes on a clothesline, and squirrels scampering across the lawns of Eden. Adam had shown a real talent for naming, because all the animals behaved just the way you'd expect them to if you thought about their names a little while. The names fit them like gloves, and that's what the birds wanted for themselves.

A pretty plump bird with eggshell-colored feathers and bright pink eyes alighted on an olive branch nearby Adam. It tilted its head to the side, gave a little flutter to its feathers, and said, "Coo? Coo?"

"You'd like a name, is that it?" said Adam, for in those days, in the Garden of Eden, a person could understand what the birds meant with all their tweets and cheeps and hooty-hoos. So Adam knew that "Coo? Coo?" was to be understood as "Who? Who will *we* be?" We, meaning me and the Mrs.

"Coombe!" said Adam cheerily. "How would you like to be a coombe?"

The bird glared at Adam and lifted the ruff of feathers about its neck in a manner that left no doubt as to its refusal. It gave no reason. Birds often don't give their reason. They just fly off, and that's that. Which is what this bird did.

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All the birds who'd been close by when Adam made his suggestion had fluttered off in different directions, with the exception of a large, mostly black bird with a neck bent over like the handle of a cane and his beak bent the same way. Large as he was, he seemed rather sickly, and the reason for that was that he hadn't had anything to eat since he was created. He belonged to the family of scavengers who live on the flesh of dead animals, and so far death did not exist in Eden, and the scavengers were all quite hungry and dispirited, scraping along on roots and berries, a diet for which they were not well adapted.

"Coombe?" Adam tried again. "Do you think that's a name *you* might like?"

The black bird shook its head sadly, and went "Grawk!" by which it meant to say, No. No, it did not want a name that rhymed with tomb and doom and gloom. For in due course, when people began to write poetry, imagine what it would be like to be the first bird to spring to mind when a poet began to think of death. "O coombe," the poet would write, "thou bird of doom that hast perched here on the tomb of the dead Lenore. Nevermore shall I see her again, O coombe! Nevermore!"

Adam could understand the bird's feeling, and he realized that all the other birds would feel the same way about being called a coombe, so even though it had a nice ring to it, he knew it wouldn't do for any of the birds, and that's how a coombe came to be a deep narrow valley on the side of a hill, and then only in certain lonely parts of Wales.

"Grawk!" said the black bird, with a different emphasis, and this time what it meant was, Can't you think of something with more positive associations? Perhaps to the arts. To painting, or violin concertos, or ballet?

None of those arts had been invented yet, but Adam, like the birds about him, had a certain prophetic streak, and he knew what this bird would like to rhyme with even if he didn't know what Culture was.

"Vulture!" he said. "How would you like to be a vulture?"

The vulture lifted its head, its eyes aglow with a new self-esteem. "Grawk!" it agreed, and its mate, close by, said "Grawk!" as well, and off the two of them flew to a tall yew tree where they settled down to wait for the arrival of death and their first good meal ever.

Not all the birds were so particular. Most of them seemed happy to

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accept the first name that came to Adam's mind. The booby raised no objection to being a booby, nor the auk to being an auk. And who would *not* like to be a chickadee or a bobolink, a cormorant or a cockatoo?

Oh, there were many birds with plainer names than that, wrens and sparrows and crows and jays, but even they could *rhyme* to something agreeable. A sparrow could speed through the air like an arrow. A wren could say Amen and then say it again, and beyond that it would rhyme to every kind of hen. Crows could form rows on telephone lines and screech and squawk from dawn till dusk, supposing all the while it was music to equal the larks'.

And as for the larks themselves, there was a song in store for them that said it all. It is in a play by William Shakespeare, called *Cymbeline*, and it begins like this: "Hark! hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings."

The birds that Adam named that day would pop up in thousands of songs in the course of time. Not only "Listen to the Mockingbird" but "Mockingbird Hill" as well. There are many good songs about robins, and one about wild geese that is really inspirational. It begins "I must go where the wild goose goes," and it's about how exciting it is always to be traveling to strange places, the way geese do.

There are so many songs about bluebirds the list would fill the page of a newspaper, and you would still have to say et cetera.

But there is one bird who can be found in even more poems than the robin or the bluebird, and that is the bird that first flew off with its mate when Adam suggested it might be known as a coombe. Now, after all the other birds had been named, those two were back with their ruffled feathers and reproachful Coo's, as though to say, Have you forgotten us? Are *we* to have no name?

Adam looked at God, and God looked at Adam, and all at once he knew the perfect name for the two birds with their gray feathers and softly purring song.

"You're doves!" he announced.

At once their breasts swelled with pride, for they could hear, prophetically, their new name echoing down through the centuries in thousands of poems and songs.

Oh, for the wings, for the wings of a dove!

On the wings of a snow-white dove!

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And then, where it says in the Psalms in the Bible: "Ye shall be as the wings of a dove that is covered with silver wings, and her feathers like gold."

Or think of what Mercutio says in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied. Cry but 'Ay me!' Couple but 'dove' and 'love.'"

For that, of course, is why the doves were so happy with the name that Adam had found them. For all eternity they'd be the only birds to rhyme with love and with the heavens above. Their immortality was a sure thing.

II
A Case of Child Abuse

"What can I tell you?" says Sarah mournfully. "He hears voices. And not just voices like you or I might hear: 'Don't do that, dumkopf!' or 'Maybe tomorrow.' No, the voice *he* hears is nothing less than the Lord God Almighty's. 'Abraham,' this voice tells him, 'behold, here I am.' Of course, there's nothing there to behold, it's a voice inside his head, but that didn't stop *him*. They get into a discussion, and this Jehovah voice tells him he's got to abduct our only son, Isaac — " She turns to the stenographer. "That's Isaac with two A's."

The stenographer nods.

Sarah continues: "If I told you how old I was when I had that kid, you wouldn't believe me. Anyhow, never mind about that. So, he takes Isaac, who's still no more than a baby — he wets his bed, he cries all night with the teething, he shouldn't even be out of the *tent* — and he takes him off to the land of *Moriah*, which is to hell and gone, but I guess you know that."

"Yes, ma'am," says the police inspector. "That's where he was arrested."

"You know, I still can't believe it," says Sarah, shaking her head. "Why would he *do* such a thing? His own son. His *only* son. I mean, yes, he *says* God told him to, so you could say that's the reason he did it. But you know what I think? I think he was jealous of the little sucker, simple as that. I told you already what he did with the kid the minute he was born. I said, 'Abe, honey, what do you think you're doing with that knife?' And he says, 'The kid's got to be circumcised. I've discussed this already with

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God.' I swear I thought at first he'd cut his little weenie clean off. I guess I should have got the message then. You've married a lunatic, honey. Take the baby and run. But what could I do? Go to my father? After I'd eloped and stolen the little clay tchotchkes that were *his* gods? Not likely. All men are lunatics, that's my theory, especially when it comes to them and their gods. I was stuck with Abraham. He was 'my man,' as the song says."

"Had he ever threatened you?" asks the police inspector.

"Never," says Sarah. "Usually he's sweet as can be. Ask the neighbors."

"Do you still, um...." The inspector conveys what he means by lowering his eyes.

"Sex, you mean? Not that much, at our age. After you get to be a hundred, the urge diminishes. As for my sister — he's married to her, too, you know — you'll have to ask her yourself, but I don't think he sees that much of Leah anymore, either. Our handmaidens, now that's another matter. He's got a thing for handmaidens. Which I, personally, have always counted a blessing."

The stenographer signals for Sarah to pause until she's caught up with her. Then, when the stenographer has given her a go-ahead, Sarah asks the inspector, "What's going to happen? Is this going to go to court, or what? I'll tell you right now, I couldn't say these things in front of a lot of people."

"No," says the inspector, "I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Your husband has influential friends. I think the whole matter will be settled out of court."

"Temporary insanity?"

The inspector nods.

"There's nothing temporary about it. Who knows what this Jehovah's going to tell him he wants for his next burnt offering? I'll tell you quite honestly, I don't feel safe around the man anymore."

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do about that, ma'am. According to the law, you are your husband's chattel. And so is the kid. That's why we can't press charges. If it had been someone else's kid, we could nail him."

"What's the point of having laws if they can't protect you?" Sarah grumbles.

"Good question," says the police inspector, as he gets up off the rug

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and smooths out the wrinkles in his burnoose. "Maybe you should have your husband ask Jehovah." And he winks. He pushes open the flap of the tent and says to one of the patrolmen, "You can send the kid in now."

Little Isaac runs into the tent, and Sarah spreads open her arms. For a while it's all hugs and tears, and then Sarah asks, "So where's your father?"

Isaac looks down at the rug. "I don't know, Mamma...I think he's with the sheep." She waits. He squirms. "Or maybe with Leah."

Sarah raises her eyes to heaven, more for the stenographer's sake than the police inspector's.

"Your husband was released earlier, ma'am," says the inspector. "But he told us to tell you he'd be home for his dinner at the usual time. And he asked us to give you this.

He hands her a string satchel, and then excuses himself, leaving Sarah alone with Isaac and the stenographer.

Sarah looks inside the satchel and announces, "Lamb chops."

Isaac perks up. "Are we having lamb chops for dinner?"

Sarah looks up at the stenographer. "You know what this is, don't you. It's what's left over from the burnt offering. He probably took the haunch over to Leah. Waste not, want not, that's my Abraham."

"So what else is new," says the stenographer. "We get this sort of thing happening every week. If it isn't Jehovah, it's Moloch. If it isn't Moloch, it's Baal. They're all alike: 'Bring me your first-born son and set him on my altar.' You're lucky your Jehovah changed his mind at the last minute. Not all of those gods do."

Sarah sighs. "You like lamb chops?" she asks the stenographer. "It looks like there's more than enough."

"Thank you, but I can't," says the stenographer. "I'm vegetarian."

III
Jahweh's Wife

Moses did not like women.

Partly this was a result of living with a wife who was certifiably insane, and partly from the trauma of abandonment in infancy. His mother could never leave off with the bulrushes, and of course the way she

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told the story it was all Pharaoh's fault for telling the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who got credit for contravening the Pharaoh's cruel orders. But his mother and those midwives were thick as thieves, and you don't suppose the little basket they had set him afloat in had anything to do with infant sacrifice and luck in the lottery? Oh no, they were saving his life, assisted by yet another female paragon, no less than Pharaoh's daughter. Tell me another!

Women! All of them worshipped idols, and all their idols had great drooping breasts and swollen stomachs by way of reminding anyone who might have forgotten where babies come from and what they drink that keeps them alive. Moses hated idols, any idols at all, male as much as female, animal, mineral, and vegetable, because there was always something the idol wanted you to do, or wouldn't let you do, and always it turned out to be exactly what his mother wanted him to do — or latter on, what his wife Zipporah wanted. He could remember watching old Puah cavorting in front of some cow of a goddess and thinking how someday he would smash all the women's idols and start a new religion just for guys, and no one would be allowed to eat snails ever again (his mother loved snails) or even spare ribs. Especially spare ribs! His mother went into ecstasies every year at the Cairo Spare Rib Festival — and afterward, talk about unclean!

For many years, even after he'd led the Jews out of bondage and started bringing down Jahweh's laws from the mountaintop where he and the Lord his God got together, Moses felt guilty for some of the laws he laid down. Not so much the busywork laws concerning the decoration of the temple with red lambswool and badger skins and shittim wood, and not even the tough laws — eye for an eye, wound for wound, stripe for stripe — since those were a useful deterrent against crime. It was the laws governing leprosy, which were complicated and strict, that he sometimes regretted. Not that there shouldn't be such laws, but perhaps they were harsher than need be, since he'd framed them at a time when he was feeling miffed with his mother, who was getting senile and would go off every weekend whoring after false gods. She would bow down to graven images and commit abominations and eat snails, so something really had to be done. So Aaron, who was a high priest by then, had declared their mother a leper. But he'd also rigged the test, and maybe that had been going

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too far. Or maybe the fault was with Moses's laws concerning leprosy. It was a chicken-or-the-egg situation.

Years later, when he was writing the story of his life and making a digest of the laws, he left out those details about his mother, and many of the stories about Zipporah, as well. In fact, he wrote almost nothing about Zipporah, except for a brief mention of her "accident" on the way to Egypt, when she'd bloodied his best robe in the process of cutting their younger son's foreskin with a sharp stone. The stains never did come out, and it wasn't as though the boy hadn't been circumcised already. Zipporah just got excited, sometimes, with a sharp stone in her hand. Her father Jethro had been crazy the same way.

Another subject Moses avoided in the Pentateuch was the vexed relationship between Jahweh and his wife Jaweenah. As a result of Moses's reticence, many of Jahweh's actions may strike readers of Genesis as irrational and unmotivated, since the book omits mention of the demands Jaweenah made upon her husband. Like Fricka, the spouse of another Divine Patriarch, Jaweenah could be a jealous and vindictive deity, and her caprices often dictated her husband's actions. Did Fricka insist that Wotan assist in the slaughter of his bastard son and spoiled darling Siegmund? Was she behind the years-long coma of his daughter Brunhilde? Yes, her responsibility in these matters is clear, just as it was Jaweenah who insisted that the child Isaac be executed by his own doting father as punishment for the child's having trespassed into Jaweenah's magic cloud-garden, where he'd picked her invisible violets. Only at the last moment had the henpecked Divinity rebel against his spouse's stern decree and provide Abraham with a ram to serve as a burnt offering in his son's stead. If Jaweenah had had her way....

Then there was the little matter of Gomorrah, a city that had been devoted to the worship of Jaweenah in her character as protectress of ovens and kilns. Gomorrah had been filled with temples where Jaweenah's priestesses baked firstborn male offerings in hollow brazen idols representing the goddess with the attributes of a male baker, including a white cap and large potholders. The powdered remains of children baked in this way were thought to secure their parents against sterility and impotence. Jahweh tried to reason with his wife concerning the propriety of her appearing in public dressed in male attire. The firstborns he didn't mind

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so much. People in those days went through a lot of firstborns: there weren't other forms of contraception. But Jaweenah wouldn't listen to reason, and finally Jahweh realized he was wasting his breath and rained down fire and brimstone on the offending city while his wife was away on a visit to the gods of Olympus.

When Jaweenah returned there was hell to pay. She stormed about the mountaintop, hurling thunderbolts and spewing lava and afflicting half her husband's Chosen People with scabs and sores in those places it is most embarrassing to scratch. Jahweh apologized and promised to have another city built for her particular worship, if only she would put by her baker's hat and the potholders, which it was unbecoming a woman to wear.

She refused.

He insisted.

She said, "Well, then, there are other gods...."

Those were Jaweenah's last words. Jahweh pronounced his spouse's doom. Her breasts withered and fell to the ground like petals from a fruit tree. When she opened her mouth to curse, her teeth broke into splinters and her tongue began to smoke. In less than a minute Jaweenah was a heap of ashes at her husband's feet. Jahweh scattered the ashes with a breath.

After he'd told Moses this story, Jahweh had misgivings. "On the whole, I wonder if it might not be better to leave all this out of the book. People could get the wrong idea as to proper behavior in a domestic crisis. Stoning adulteresses is one thing, but I may have gone too far. It's that darn temper of mine. When I wax wroth...."

"But what will I tell people when they ask about your wife?"

"Say I was never married. Say I'm the only god there ever was, the Alpha and Omega. Period."

"But the other major deities all have wives."

"There are no other deities, Moses. How many times do I have to tell you."

"Yes, Lord," said Moses, happy to be his God's submissive instrument.

And that is why to this very day we worship One God, who is male and unmarried.

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Charlie Finlay's first story appeared here last August, but "Footnotes" probably didn't prepare you for what is to come. "The Political Officer" is an ambitious and engaging story set aboard a spaceship in the aftermath of a galactic war...but it's not entirely clear just who the enemies are. Have we met them and are they us?

The Political Officer

By Charles Coleman Finlay

MAXIM NIKOMEDES SAW THE other man rush toward him but there was no room to dodge in the crate-packed corridor. He braced for the impact. The other man pulled up short, his face blanching in the pallid half-light of the "night" rotation. It was Kulakov, the chief petty officer. He went rigid and snapped a salute.

"Sir! Sorry, sir!" His voice trembled.

"At ease, Kulakov," Max said. "Not your fault. It's a tight fit inside this metal sausage."

Standard ship joke. The small craft was stuffed with supplies, mostly food, for the eighteen-month voyage ahead. Max waited for the standard response, but Kulakov stared through the hull into deep space. He was near sixty, old for the space service, old for his position, and the only man aboard who made Max, in his mid-forties, feel young.

Max smiled, an expression so faint it could be mistaken for a twitch. "But it's better than being stuck in a capped-off sewer pipe, no?"

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Which is what the ship would be on the voyage home. "You've got that right, sir!" said Kulakov.

"Carry on."

Kulakov shrank aside like an old church deacon, afraid to touch a sinner lest he catch the sin. Max expected that reaction from the crew, and not just because they'd nicknamed him the Corpse for his cadaverous and dead expression. As the political officer, he held the threat of death over every career aboard: the death of some careers would entail a corporeal equivalent. For the first six weeks of their mission, after spongediving the new wormhole, Max had cultivated invisibility and waited for the crew to fall into the false complacency of routine. Now it was time to shake them up again to see if he could find the traitor he suspected. He brushed against Kulakov on purpose as he passed by him.

He twisted his way through the last passage and paused outside the visiting officers' cabin. He lifted his knuckles to knock, then changed his mind, turned the latch and swung open the door. The three officers sitting inside jumped at the sight of him. Guilty consciences, Max hoped.

Captain Ernst Petoskey recovered first. "Looking for someone, Lieutenant?"

Max let the silence become uncomfortable while he studied Petoskey. The captain stood six and a half feet tall, his broad shoulders permanently hunched from spending too much time in ships built for smaller men. The crew loved him and would eagerly die — or kill — for him. Called him Papa behind his back. He wouldn't shave again until they returned safely to spaceport, and his beard was juice-stained at the corner by proscripted chewing tobacco. Max glanced past Lukinov, the paunchy, balding "radio lieutenant," and stared at Ensign Pen Reedy, the only woman on the ship.

She was lean, with prominent cheekbones, but the thing Max always noticed first were her hands. She had large, red-knuckled hands. She remained impeccably dressed and groomed, even six weeks into the voyage. Every hair on her head appeared to be individually placed as if they were all soldiers under her command.

Petoskey and Lukinov sat on opposite ends of the bunk. Reedy sat on a crate across from them. Another crate between them held a bottle, tumblers, and some cards.

Petoskey, finally uncomfortable with the silence, opened his mouth again.

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"Just looking," Max pre-empted him. "And what do I find but the captain himself in bed with Drozhin's boys?"

Petoskey glanced at the bunk. "I see only one, and he's hardly a boy."

Lukinov, a few years younger than Max, smirked and tugged at the lightning-bolt patch on his shirt sleeve. "And what's with calling us *Drozhin's* boys? We're just simple radiomen. If I have to read otherwise, I'll have you up for falsifying reports when we get back to Jesusalem."

He pronounced their home *Hey-zoo-salaam*, like the popular video stars did, instead of the older way, *Jeez-us-ail-em*.

"Things are not always what they appear to be, are they?" said Max.

Lukinov, Reedy, and a third man, Burdick, were the intelligence listening team assigned to intercept and decode Adarean messages — the newly opened wormhole passage would let the ship dive undetected into the Adarean system to spy. The three had been personally selected and prepped for this mission by Dmitri Drozhin, the legendary Director of Jesusalem's Department of Intelligence. Drozhin had been the Minister too, back when it had still been the Ministry of the Wisdom of Prophets Reborn. He was the only high government official to survive the Revolution *in situ*, but these days younger men like Mallove in the Department of Political Education challenged his influence.

"Next time, knock first, Lieutenant," Petoskey said.

"Why should I, Captain?" Max returned congenially. "An honest man has nothing to fear from his conscience, and what am I if not the conscience of every man aboard this ship?"

"We don't need a conscience when we have orders," Petoskey said with a straight face.

Lukinov tilted his head back dramatically and sneered. "Come off it, Max. I invited the captain up here to celebrate, if that's all right with you. Reedy earned her comet today."

Indeed, she had. The young ensign wore a gold comet pinned to her left breast pocket, similar to the ones embroidered on the shirts of the other two officers. Crewmen earned their comets by demonstrating competence on every ship system — Engineering, Ops and Nav, Weapons, Vacuum and Radiation. Reedy must have qualified in record time. This was her first space assignment. "Congratulations," Max said.

Reedy suppressed a genuine smile. "Thank you, sir."

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"That makes her the last one aboard," Petoskey said. "Except for you."

"What do I need to know about ship systems? If I understand the minds and motivations of the men who operate them, it is enough."

"It isn't. Not with this," his mouth twisted distastefully, "*miscegenated*, patched-together, scrapyard ship. I need to be able to count on every man in an emergency."

"Is it that bad? What kind of emergency do you expect?"

Lukinov sighed loudly. "You're becoming a bore, Max. You checked on us, now go make notes in your little spy log and leave us alone."

"Either that or pull up a crate and close the damn hatch," said Petoskey. "We could use a fourth."

The light flashed off Lukinov's gold signet ring as he waved his hand in clear negation. "You don't want to do that, Ernst. This is the man who won his true love in a card game."

Petoskey looked over at Max. "Is that so?"

"I won my wife in a card game, yes." Max didn't think that story was widely known outside his own department. "But that was many years ago."

"I heard you cheated to win her," said Lukinov. He was Max's counterpart in Intelligence — the Department of Political Education couldn't touch him. The two Departments hated each other and protected their own. "Heard that she divorced you too. I guess an ugly little weasel like you has to get it where he can."

"But unlike your wife, she always remained faithful."

Lukinov muttered a curse and pulled back his fist. Score one on the sore spot. Petoskey reached out and grabbed the intelligence officer's elbow. "None of that aboard my ship. I don't care who you two are. Come on, Nikomedes. If you're such a hotshot card player, sit down. I could use a little challenge."

A contrary mood seized Max. He turned into the hallway, detached one of the crates, and shoved it into the tiny quarters.

"So what are we playing?" he asked, sitting down.

"Blind Man's Draw," said Petoskey, shuffling the cards. "Deuce beats an ace, ace beats everything else."

Max nodded. "What's the minimum?"

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"A temple to bid, a temple to raise."

Jesusalem's founders stamped their money with an image of the Temple to encourage the citizen-colonists to render their wealth unto God. The new plastic carried pictures of the revolutionary patriots who'd overthrown the Patriarch, but everyone still called them temples. "Then I'm in for a few hands," Max said.

Petoskey dealt four cards face down. Max kept the king of spades and tossed three cards back into the pile. The ones he got in exchange were just as bad.

"So," said Lukinov, peeking at his hand. "We have the troika of the Service all gathered in one room. Military, Intelligence, and — one card, please, ah, raise you one temple — and what should I call you, Max? Schoolmarm?"

Max saw the raise. "If you like. Just remember that Intelligence is useless without a good Education."

"Is that your sermon these days?"

Petoskey collected the discards. "Nothing against either of you gentlemen," he said, "but it's your mother screwed three ways at once, isn't it. There's three separate chains of command on a ship like this one. It's a recipe for mutiny." He pulled at his beard. "Has been on other ships, strictly off the record. And with this mission ahead, if we don't all work together, God help us."

Max kept the ten of spades with his king and took two more cards. "Not that there is one," he said officially, "but let God help our enemies. A cord of three strands is not easily broken."

Petoskey nodded his agreement. "That's a good way to look at it. A cord of three strands, all intertwined." He stared each of them in the eyes. "So take care of the spying, and the politics, but leave the running of the ship to me."

"Of course," said Lukinov.

"That's why you're the captain and both of us are mere *lieutenants*," said Max. In reality, both he and Lukinov had the same service rank as Petoskey. On the ground, in Jesusalem's mixed-up service, they were all three colonels. Lukinov was technically senior of the three, though Max had final authority aboard ship within his sphere.

It was, indeed, a troubling conundrum.

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Max's hand held nothing — king and ten of spades, two of hearts, and a seven of clubs. Petoskey tossed the fifth card down face-up. Another deuce.

Max hated Blind Man's Draw. It was like playing the lottery. The card a man showed you was the one he'd just been dealt; you never really knew what he might be hiding. He looked at the other players' hands. Petoskey showed the eight of clubs and Lukinov the jack of diamonds. Ensign Reedy folded her hand and said, "I'm out."

"Raise it a temple and call," Max said, on the off chance he might beat a pair of aces. They turned their cards over and it was money thrown away. Petoskey won with three eights.

Lukinov shook his head. "Holding onto the deuces, Max? That's almost always a loser's hand."

"Except when it isn't."

Petoskey won three of the next five hands, with Lukinov and Max splitting the other two. The poor ensign said little and folded often. Max decided to deal in his other game. While Lukinov shuffled the cards, Max rubbed his nose and said to the air, "You're awfully silent, Miss Reedy. Contemplating your betrayal of us to the Adareans?"

Lukinov mis-shuffled. A heartbeat later, Captain Petoskey picked up his spittoon and spat.

Reedy's voice churned as steady as a motor in low gear. "What do you mean, sir?"

"You're becoming a bore again, Max," Lukinov said under his breath.

"What's this about?" Petoskey asked.

"Perhaps Miss Reedy should explain it herself," Max replied. "Go on, Ensign. Describe the immigrant ghetto in your neighborhood, your childhood chums, Sabbathday afternoons at language academy."

"It was hardly that, sir," she said smoothly. "They were just kids who lived near our residence in the city. And there were never any formal classes."

"Oh, there was much more to it than that," Max pressed. "Must I spell it out for you? You lived in a neighborhood of expatriate Adareans. Some spymaster chose you to become a mole before you were out of diapers and started brainwashing you before you could talk. Now while you pretend to serve Jesusalem you really serve Adares. Yes?"

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"No. Sir." Reedy's hands, resting fingertip to fingertip across her knees, trembled slightly. "For one thing, how did they know women would ever be admitted to the military academies?"

Reedy hadn't been part of the first class to enter, but she graduated with the first class to serve active duty. "They saw it was common everywhere else. Does it matter? Who can understand their motives? Their gene modifications make them impure. Half-animal, barely human."

She frowned, as if she couldn't believe that kind of prejudice still existed. "Nukes don't distinguish between one set of genes and another, sir. They suffered during the bombardments, just like we did. They fought beside us, they went to our church. Even the archbishop called them good citizens. They're as proud to be Jesusalemites as I am. And as loyal. Sir."

Max rubbed his nose again. "A role model for treason. They betrayed one government to serve another. I know for a fact this crew contains at least one double agent, someone who serves two masters. I suspect there are more. Is it you, Miss Reedy?"

Lukinov turned into a fossil before Max's eyes. Petoskey glared at the young intelligence officer across the table like a man contemplating murder.

Reedy pressed her fingertips together until her hands grew still. "Sir. There may be a traitor, but it's not me. Sir."

Max leaned back casually. "I've read your Academy records, Ensign, and find them interesting for the things they leave out. Such as your role in the unfortunate accident that befell Cadet Vance."

Reedy was well disciplined. Max's comments were neither an order nor a question, so she said nothing, gave nothing away.

"Vance's injuries necessitated his withdrawal from the Academy," Max continued. "What exactly did you have to do with that situation?"

"Come on, Max," said Lukinov in his senior officer's cease-and-desist voice. "This is going too far. There are always accidents in the Academy and in the service. Usually it's the fault of the idiot who ends up slabbed. Some stupid mistake."

Before Max could observe that Vance's mistake had been antagonizing Reedy, Petoskey interrupted. "Lukinov, have you forgotten how to deal? Are you broke yet, Nikomedes? You can quit any time you want."

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Max flashed the plastic in his pocket while Lukinov started tossing down the cards. As he made the second circuit around their makeshift table, the lights flickered and went off. Max's stomach fluttered as the emergency lights blinked on, casting a weak red glare over the cramped room. The cards sailed past the table and into the air. Petoskey slammed his glass down. It bounced off the table and twirled toward the ceiling, spilling little brown droplets of whiskey.

Petoskey slapped the ship's intercom. "Bridge!"

"Ensign," Lukinov said. "Find something to catch that mess before the grav comes back on and splatters it everywhere."

"Yes, sir," Reedy answered and scrambled to the bathroom for a towel.

"Bridge!" shouted Petoskey, then shook his head. "The com's down."

"It's just the ship encounter drill," Lukinov said.

"There's no drill scheduled for this rotation. And we haven't entered Adarean space yet, so we can't be encountering another ship...."

Another ship.

The thought must have hit all four of them simultaneously. As they propelled themselves frog-like toward the hatch, they crashed into one another, inevitable in the small space. During the jumble, Max took a kick to the back of his head. It hurt, even without any weight behind it. No accident, he was sure of that, but he didn't see who did it.

Petoskey flung the door open. "The pig-hearted, fornicating bastards."

Max echoed the sentiment when he followed a moment later. The corridor was blocked by drifting crates. They'd been improperly secured.

"Ensign!" snapped Petoskey.

"Yes, Captain."

"To the front! I'll pass you the crates, you attach them."

"Yes, sir."

"Can I *trust* you to do that?"

"Yes, sir!"

Max almost felt sorry for Reedy. Almost. In typical fashion for these older ships, someone had strung a steel cable along the corridor, twist-tied to the knobs of the security lights. Max held onto it and stayed out of the way as Petoskey grabbed one loose box after another and passed them back

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to Reedy. There was the steady rasp of Velcro as they made their way toward the bridge.

"What do you think it is?" Lukinov whispered to him. "If it's a ship, then the wormhole's been discovered...."

The implications hung in the air like everything else. Max compared the size of Lukinov's boot with the sore spot on the back of his head. "Could be another wormhole. The sponge is like that. Once one hole opens up, you usually find several more. There's no reason why the Adareans couldn't find a route in the opposite direction."

Lukinov braced himself against the wall, trying to keep himself oriented as if the grav was still on. "If it's the Adareans, they'll be thinking invasion again."

"It could be someone neutral too," said Max. "Most of the spongedivers from Earth are prospecting in toward the core again, so it could be one of them. Put on your ears and find out who they are. I'll determine whether they're for us or against us."

Lukinov laughed. "If they're against us, then Ernst can eliminate them. That's a proper division of labor."

"Our system is imperfect, but it works." That was a stretch, Max told himself. Maybe he ought to just say that the system worked better than the one it replaced.

"Hey," Petoskey shouted. "Are you gentlemen going to sit there or join me on the bridge?"

"Coming," said Lukinov, echoed a second later by Max.

They descended two levels and came to the control center. Max followed the others through the open hatch. Men sat strapped to their chairs, faces tinted the color of blood by the glow of the emergency lights. Conduits, ducts, and wires ran overhead, like the intestines of some manmade monster. One of the vents kicked on, drawing a loud mechanical breath. Truly, Max thought, they were in the belly of leviathan now.

One of the men called "Attention" and Petoskey immediately replied, "At ease — report!"

"Lefty heard a ship," returned Commander Gordet, a plug-shaped man with a double chin. "It was nothing more than a fart in space, I swear. I folded the wings and initiated immediate shutdown per your instructions before our signature could be detected."

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"Contact confirmed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good work then." The ship chairs were too small for Petoskey's oversized frame. He preferred to stand anyway and had bolted a towel rack to the floor in the center of the deck. The crew tripped over it when the grav was on, but now Petoskey slipped his feet under it to keep from bumping his head on the low ceilings. It was against all regulations, but, just as with his smuggled tobacco, Petoskey broke regulations whenever it suited him. He shared this quality with many of the fleet's best deep space captains. "Those orders were for when we entered Adarean space, Commander," Petoskey added. "I commend your initiative. Put a commendation in Engineer Elefteriou's record also."

"Yes, sir." Gordet's voice snapped like elastic, pleased by the captain's praise.

"Identity?"

"Its prime number pings up Outback. Corporate prospectors. Her signature looks like one of the new class."

Petoskey grabbed the passive scope above his head and pulled it down to his eyes. "Vector?"

"Intercept."

"*Intercept*?"

"It's headed in-system and we're headed out. At our current respective courses and velocities, we should come within spitting distance of each other just past Big Brother."

Big Brother was the nickname for this system's larger gas giant. Little Brother, the smaller gas giant, was on the far side of the sun, out past the wormhole to home.

"Are they coming from the Adares jump?" Petoskey asked.

"That's what we thought at first," said Gordet. "But it appears now that they're entering from a third wormhole. About thirty degrees negative of the Adares jump, on the opposite side of the ecliptic." He glanced over the navigator's shoulder at the monitor and read off the orbital velocity.

Petoskey continued to stare into the scope. "Shit. There's nothing out here."

Gordet cleared his throat. "It's millions of kilometers out, sir. Still too far away for a clear visual."

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"No, I mean there's *nothing* out here. This system won't hold their attention for long. It's only a matter of time before they find the opened holes to Adares and home." He paused. "Do that and they'll close our route back."

Indeed. Max had a strong urge to pace. If he started bouncing off the walls Petoskey would order him off the bridge, so he tried to float with purpose. Burdick, the third member of the intelligence team, paused in the hatch, carrying a large box. He nodded to Lukinov and Reedy, who followed him forward toward the secure radio room. Max wondered briefly why Burdick had left his post.

"The intercept makes things easier for us," Petoskey concluded aloud. "Calculate the soonest opportunity to engage without warning. With any luck, the missing ship will be counted as a wormhole mishap." Absorbed by the sponge.

Elefteriou turned and spoke to Rucker, the first lieutenant, who spoke to Gordet, who said, "Sir, radio transmissions from the ship appear to be directed at another ship in the vicinity of the jump. If we neutralize this target, then the other dives out and lives to witness."

"Just one other ship?"

"No way of telling this far out without the active sensors." Which they couldn't use without showing up like a solar flare.

"The order stands," said Petoskey. "Also, Commander, loose cargo in the corridors impeded my progress to the bridge. This is a contraindication of ship readiness."

Gordet stiffened, as crushed by this criticism as he'd been puffed up by the praise. "It'll be taken care of, *sir*."

"See to it. Where's Chevrier?" Arkady Chevrier was the chief engineer. He came from a family of industrialists that contributed heavily to the Revolution. His uncle headed the Department of Finance, and his father was a general. Mallove, Max's boss in Political Education, had warned him not to antagonize Chevrier.

"In the engine room, sir," answered Gordet. "He thought that the sudden unscheduled shutdown of main power resulted in a drain on the main battery arrays. I sent him to fix it."

"Raise Engineering on the com."

"Yes, sir," said Gordet. "Raise Engineering."

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Lefty punched his console, listened to his earphones, shook his head.

Petoskey shifted the plug of tobacco in his mouth. "When I tried to contact the bridge from quarters, the com was down. If I have to choose between ship communications and life support in the presence of a possible enemy vessel, I want communications first. Get a status report from Engineering and give me a com link to all essential parts of the ship if you have to do it with tin cans and string. Is that clear?"

Gordet's jowls quivered as he answered. "Yessir!"

Max noted that Gordet did not divide his attention well. He'd been so absorbed with the other ship, he hadn't noticed the ship communications problem. Several past errors in judgment featured prominently in his permanent file. He seemed unaware that this was the reason he'd been passed over for ship command of his own. But he was steady, and more or less politically sound.

He could also be a vindictive S.O.B. Max watched him turn on his subordinates. "Corporal Elefteriou," Gordet said. "I want a full report on com status. Five minutes ago is not soon enough. Lieutenant Rucker!"

"Sir."

"Get your ass to Engineering. I want to receive Chevrier's verbal report on this com here." He punched it with his fist for emphasis. "If it doesn't come in fifteen minutes, you can hold your breath while the rest of us put on space gear."

The first lieutenant set off for Engineering. Petoskey cleared his throat. "Commander, one other thing."

"Yes?"

"We'll switch to two shifts now, six hours on, six off. All crew."

"Yes, sir."

Petoskey gestured for Max to come beside him.

"So now we wait around for three days to intercept," Petoskey said in a low voice. "You look like a damn monkey floating there, Nikomedes. We could surgi-tape your boots to the deck."

"That's not necessary." Petoskey wasn't the only captain in the fleet who'd tie his political officer down to one spot if he could. Max needed to be free to move around to catch his traitor.

"If you were qualified for any systems, I'd put you to work."

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An excellent reason to remain unqualified. "And what would you have me do?"

"At this point?" Petoskey shrugged. Then he frowned, and jerked his head toward the intelligence team's radio room. "Was that true? About — ?"

"This is *not* the place," Max said firmly. Illusion was not reality; the crew pretended not to hear Petoskey speak, but they'd repeat every word that came from his mouth.

"I hate the Adareans, I want you to know that," Petoskey said. "Anything to do with the Adareans, I hate, and I'll have none of it aboard my ship. So if there's any danger, even from one of the intelligence men — "

"There will be no danger," Max asserted firmly. "It is my job to make certain of that."

"See to it, Lieutenant."

"I will." Max was surprised. That qualified as the most direct command any captain had given him during his tenure as a political officer.

Petoskey returned an almost respectful nod. Max was about to suggest a later discussion when Lukinov shouted from the hatch.

"Captain. You might want to listen to this. We tried to raise you on the com, but it's not working."

Petoskey slipped his feet free and followed the intelligence officer. Max invited himself and swam along.

Inside the listening room, Reedy stood — or floated — at a long desk, wearing headphones and making notes on the translation in her palm-pad. Burdick had a truck battery surgi-taped to a table wedged in the tiny room's rounded corner. Wires ran from it to an open panel on the main concomsole, and Burdick connected others. He looked up from his work and grinned as they came into the hatch. "Gotta love the electrician's mates," he said. "They've got *every*thing."

Lukinov laughed and handed headphones to Petoskey. "Wait until you hear this."

Petoskey slipped the earpieces into place. "I don't understand Chinese," he said after a minute. "Always sounds like an out-of-tune guitar to me."

Lukinov's smile widened. "But it's voices, not code, don't you see?

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The level of encryption was like cheap glue." He made a knife-opening-a-letter gesture with his hands.

"Good work. What have you learned so far?"

Lukinov leaned over Reedy's shoulder to look at her palm-pad. "Corporate security research ship. Spongedivers."

Petoskey nodded. "Bunch of scientists and part-time soldiers. Soft, but great tech. Way beyond ours. It's a safe bet their battery arrays don't go down when they fly mute. Lefty says there's another one parked out by the wormhole."

Lukinov confirmed this. "We know it because the radio tech is talking to his *girl*friend over on the other ship."

Burdick snickered, and Petoskey muttered "Mixed crews" with all the venom of a curse. He glared at Reedy so hard his eyes must have burned a hole in the ensign's head. The young woman looked up. "Yes, sir?" she asked.

"I didn't speak to you," Petoskey snapped.

Mixed crews were part of the Revolution, a way to double manpower — so to speak — in the military forces and give Jesusalem a chance to catch up. So far it was only in the officer corps, and even there it hadn't been received well. Some men, like Vance at the Academy, openly tried to discourage it despite the government's commitment.

Lukinov held the back of Reedy's seat to keep from drifting toward the ceiling. "The inbound ship's called the *Deng Xiaopeng*. Why does that name sound familiar?"

Petoskey shrugged. "Means nothing to me."

If they didn't know, then Max would give them an answer. He cleared his throat. "I believe that Deng Xiaopeng was one of Napoleon's generals."

Lukinov curled his mouth skeptically.

"That doesn't sound right," said Petoskey.

"I'm quite certain of it," said Max, bracing himself between the wall and floor at angle sideways to the others. "Confusion to the enemy."

"Always," replied Petoskey, apparently happy to find something he could agree with. "Always."

Max lay on the bunk in his cabin waiting for the clock to tick over to morning. Two days after the spongedivers had been sighted, his thoughts

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still careened weightlessly off the small walls. The presence of the ship from Outback complicated the ship's mission and his. Meanwhile, he was cut off from his superiors, unable to guess which goal they wanted him to pursue now. Or goals, as the case more likely was. So he was on his own again. Forced to decide for himself.

Nothing new about that, he thought ruefully.

He released the straps and pushed off for the door to take a tour of the ship. He paused for a moment, then grabbed his cap, and tugged it down tight on his head. If he made it a formal tour of the ship, it might draw out his traitor.

When he opened the door, he saw another one cracked open down the corridor. Lieutenant Rucker peeked out and gestured for Max to come inside. Max checked to see that no one was in the hall and slipped into the room.

The blond young man closed the door too fast and it slammed shut. He noticed Max's cap and saluted with perfect etiquette before producing an envelope. "I was hoping to catch you," he said. "This is from Commander Gordet."

Max took the multi-tool from his pocket and flicked out the miniature knife to slice open the seal. He studied the sheet inside. Gordet had written down the codes for the safe that held the captain's secret orders. Interesting. Max wondered if Rucker had made a copy for himself. "Did Gordet say anything specific?"

"He said to tell you that if we were to engage the Outback ship in combat and anything unfortunate were to happen to the captain, you would have his full cooperation and support."

"So what did he tell the captain?"

Rucker looked at the wall, opened his mouth, closed it again. He was not a quick liar.

Max gave him an avuncular clap on the shoulder. "You can tell me, Lieutenant. I'll find out anyway."

Rucker gulped, still refusing to meet Max's eyes. "He told the captain that, um, if we were to engage the other ship in combat, and anything unfortunate were to happen to you, he'd make sure it was all clear in the records."

So Gordet was indecisive, trying to play both sides at once. That was

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a hard game. The Commander had no gift for it either. "What's your opinion of Gordet?" probed Max.

"He's a good officer. I'm proud to serve under him."

Rather standard response, deserving of Max's withering stare. This time Rucker's eyes did meet his.

"But, um, he's still mad about losing his cabin to you, sir. He doesn't like bunking with the junior officers."

"He'll get over it," said Max. "Just remind him that Lukinov is bunking with Burdick, eh?" He gestured at Rucker to open the door. Rucker looked both ways down the corridor, motioned that it was clear, and Max went on his way.

He headed topside, pulling himself hand over hand up the narrow shaft. When he exited the tube he found Kulakov conducting an emergency training drill in the forward compartments. Stick-its posted to all the surfaces indicated the type and extent of combat damage. Crews in full space gear performed "repairs" while the chief petty officer graded their performance.

"You're dead," shouted Kulakov, grabbing a man by his collar and pulling him out of the exercise. "You forgot that you're a vacuum cleaner!"

"But sir, I'm suited up properly." His voice sounded injured, even distorted slightly by the microphone.

"But you're not plugged in," Kulakov said, tapping the stick-it on the wall. "That's open to the outside, and without your tether you're nothing more now than a very small meteor moving away from the ship! What are the rest of you looking at?"

He glanced over his shoulder, saw Max, and froze. The crews stopped their exercise.

"You just spaced another crewman," said Max, tilting his head toward a man who'd backed into the wall. "Carry on."

He turned away without waiting for Kulakov's salute. He didn't know why he had such an effect on that man, but now he was thinking he should look into it.

He proceeded through several twisting corridors, designed to slow and confuse boarding parties headed for the bridge, and passed the gym. He needed exercise. The weightlessness was already starting to get to him. But he decided to worry about that later.

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He paused when he came to the missile room.

The Black Forest.

That was the crew's nickname for it. Four polished black columns rose four uninterrupted stories — tubes for nuclear missiles, back when this ship was intended to fight the same kind of dirty war waged by the Adareans. It was the largest open space in the entire ship. When the grav was on, the men exercised by running laps, up one set of stairs, across the catwalk, down the other, around the tubes, and up again.

Max went out onto the catwalk, climbed up on the railing, and jumped.

If one could truly jump in zero-gee, that was. He pushed himself toward the floor and prayed that the grav didn't come on unexpectedly. On the way down he noticed someone who feared just that possibility making their way up the stairs.

Max did a somersault, extending his legs to change his momentum and direction, pushed off one of the tubes, and bounced over to see who it was. He immediately regretted doing so. It was Sergeant Simco, commander of the combat troops.

Every captain personally commanded a detachment of ground troops. It could be as big as a battalion in some cases, but for this voyage, with an entire crew of only 141, the number was limited to ten. Officially, they were along to repel boarders and provide combat assistance if needed. Unofficially, they were called troubleshooters. If crewmen gave the captain any trouble, it was the troopers' job to shoot them.

Simco would enjoy doing it too. He had more muscles than brains. But then nobody had that many brains.

"Hello, Sergeant," Max called.

"Sir, that was nicely done."

"I didn't have you pegged for the cautious type."

Simco shook his head. "I don't like freefall unless I've got a parachute strapped to my back."

Typical groundhog response. "Are your men ready to board and take that Outback ship, Sergeant?"

"Sir, I could do it all by myself. They're *women*."

They both laughed, Simco snapped a perfect salute, and Max pushed off from the railing. When he landed on the bottom, he saw placards

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marked "Killshot" hanging on each of the four tubes. That meant they were loaded with live missiles, ready to launch. Something new since the last time he'd passed through the Black Forest. He saw handwriting scrawled across the bottom of the placards, and went up close to read it. *A. G. W.*

Under the old government, the hastily thrown together Department of War had been called the Ministry of A Just God's Wrath. Considering the success of the Adareans, the joke had been that the name was a typo and should have been called Adjust God's Wrath. Some devout crewman still had the same goal.

On the lower level, Max continued to the aftmost portion of the ship, off limits to all crew except for Engineering and Senior officers. Only one sealed hatch allowed direct entrance to this section. Max found an off-duty electrician's mate sitting there, watching a pocketvid. The faint sound of someone dying came from the tiny speaker.

Max stopped in front of the crewman. "What are you watching?"

The crewman looked up, startled. DePuy, that was his name. He jumped to his feet and went all the way to the ceiling. He saluted with one hand, while the thumb of the other flicked to the pause button. "It's *A Fire on the Land*, sir. It's about the Adarean nuking of New Nazareth."

"I'm familiar with it," Max replied. Political Education approved all videos, practically ran the video business. "The bombing and the vid. Move aside and let me pass."

"Sorry, sir, the chief engineer said...."

Max turned as cold as deep space. He reached under DePuy to open the hatch. "Move aside, crewman."

"The chief engineer gave me a direct order, sir!"

"And I am giving you another direct order right now." Damn it, thought Max, the man still hesitated. "Rejecting an order from your political officer is mutiny, Mr. DePuy. A year is a very long time to spend in the ship's brig waiting for trial."

"Sir! A year is a very long time to serve under a chief officer who holds grudges, sir!"

"If I have to repeat my order a third time, you *will* go to the brig."

DePuy pushed off from the wall. Though he seemed to seriously consider, for a split second, whether he wouldn't rather be locked up than face Chevrier's temper.

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Max went down the corridor and paused outside the starboard Battery Room. The hatch stood open on the two-story space. One of the battery arrays was completely disassembled and diagrammed on the wall, with the key processing chips circled in red. A small group of men, most of them stripped to their waists, crowded into the soft-walled clean room in the corner. A large duct ran up from it toward the ceiling, the motor struggling to draw air. A crewman looked up and tapped the chief engineer on the shoulder.

"You!" Chevrier shouted as soon as he saw Max. "This is a restricted area! I want you out of my section right now!"

"Nothing is off limits to me," Max replied.

"Fuck your mother!" Chevrier thundered, shooting across the room and getting right in Max's face. Chevrier's eyes had dark circles around them like storm clouds, and red lines in the whites like tiny bolts of lightning. He probably hadn't slept since the spongediver was spotted; no doubt he was also pumped up on Nova or its more legal equivalent from the dispensary. That would explain his heavy sweating. It couldn't drip off him in the weightlessness, but had simply accumulated in a pool about a half inch deep that sloshed freely in the vicinity of his breastbone. Max noticed that the comet insignia was *branded* on Chevrier's bare chest. The Revolutionary government had banned that tradition, but the branding irons still floated around some ships in the service. Chevrier was the type who had probably heated it up with a hand welder and branded himself. He jabbed a finger in the direction of the empty spot on Max's left breast pocket. "You haven't qualified for a single ship's system," he said, "and you sure as hell aren't reactor qualified. Now get out of my section!"

"You forgetting something, soldier?" Max asked, in as irritating a voice as he could manage.

Chevrier laughed in disbelief. "I wish I could forget! I've got a major problem on my hands, a ship with no fucking backup power."

Max took a deep breath. "Did somebody break your arm, *soldier*?"

Chevrier's eyes flickered. He made a sloppy motion with his right hand in the general direction of his head. Had Mallove sent word in the other direction too? Did Chevrier know that Max was supposed to leave him alone?

"Good. Give me a status report on the power situation."

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The chief engineer inhaled deeply. "Screwed up and likely to stay that way. The crewman on duty panicked — he folded the wings and powered down the Casmir drive without disengaging the batteries first and fried half the chips. We are now trying to build new chips, atom by atom, but you need a grade A clean hood to do that. And our hood is about as tight and clean as an old whore."

Max had heard all this already, less vividly described, from the captain's reports. "Go on."

"Normally, we could just switch over to the secondary array, but some blackhole of a genius gutted our portside Battery Room and replaced it with a salvaged groundside nuclear reactor so we can float through Adarean space disguised like background radiation in order to do God knows what."

"But you can switch communications, ship systems, propulsion, all that, over to the reactor, right?"

That was the plan: dive into Adarean space, do one circuit around the sun running on the nukes while recording everything they could on the military and political communications channels, then head home again.

"We've already done all that," answered Chevrier, "but we can't power up the Casmir drive with it. It's strictly inner system, no diving." He suddenly noticed the pool of sweat on his chest, went to flick it away, then stopped. "The Adareans won't scan us if we're running on nuclears, but they wouldn't scan canvas sails either, so we might as well have used them instead. We've got to fix the main battery at some point."

"Can you bring the grav back online?"

"Not safely, no, and not with the reactor. It's a power hog. Too many things to go wrong."

"Lasers?"

Chevrier ground his teeth. "You could talk to the captain, you know. He sends down here every damned hour for another report, asking the same exact damn questions."

"Lasers?" repeated Max firmly.

"I recommended other options to the captain, but if you want to turn some Outback ship into space slag, I'll give you enough power to do it. As long as you let me comb through the debris for spare parts once you're done. Might be one way to get some decent equipment."

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"Fair enough. How are your men holding up?"

"They're soldiers." He pronounced the word very differently than Max had. "They do exactly what they're told. Except for that worthless snot of a mate who apparently can't even guard a fucking sealed hatch properly."

Max didn't like the sound of that. Chevrier couldn't keep pushing his men as hard as he pushed himself, or they'd start to break. "Your men are not machines — "

"Hell they aren't! A ship's crew is one big machine and you're a piece of grit in the silicone, a short in the wire. With you issuing orders outside the chain of command, the command splits. You either need to fit in or get the hell out of the machine!"

Chevrier jabbed his finger at Max's chest again to punctuate his statement. This time, he made contact with enough force to send the two men in opposite directions.

It was clear that he didn't mean to touch Max, and just as clear that he didn't mean to back down. He glared at Max, daring him to make something of it. Aggressiveness was the main side effect of Nova. It built up until the men went supernova and burned out. On top of that, Chevrier also had that look some men got when things went very wrong. He couldn't fix things so he wanted to smash them instead.

Max could bring him up on charges, but the ship needed its chief engineer right now. And if Mallove had promised his friends in government that he would protect Chevrier....

Max decided to ignore the incident. For the time being. "I'll be sure to make a record of your comments."

Chevrier snorted, as if he'd won a game of chicken. "If you have problems with any of the big words, come back and I'll spell them out for you." He flapped his hand near his head again, turned and went back to the clean hood.

The other men scowled at Max.

That was the problem with anger — it was an infectious disease. Frustration only made it spread faster. He continued his tour, looking into the main engine room and then at the nuclear reactors. Nobody was in the former because there was nothing to be done there, and nobody was in the latter because radiation spooked them. One man sat in the control room,

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reading the monitors. Max hovered near the ceiling a moment looking over the crewman's shoulder, comparing the pictures on the vids to the layout of the rooms. The crewman stared at the monitors intently, pretending not to see Max. Yes, thought Max, anger was very infectious. You never knew who might catch it next.

The hapless mate DePuy still guarded the hatch, whipping the vid behind his back as he snapped to attention. Max ignored him. Accidents happened. Some idiots would just slab themselves.

He went back through the Black Forest, acknowledging salutes from a pair of shooters, the tactics officer's mates. He swam through the air to the top level, and down the main corridor, past the open door of the exercise room. He turned back. If grav was going to be offline much longer, he needed to sign up for exercise time. Physically, he needed to stay sharp right now.

Max pushed the door open. The room was dark. It surprised him briefly that no one was there, but then, with the six-and-sixes, and all the drills, the men were probably too busy. He hit the light switch. Nothing came on. He moved farther into the room to hit the second switch. Something hard smashed on the back of the head, knocking his cap off. He twisted, trying to get a hold of his assailant, but there was no one behind him. He realized that the other man was above him, on the ceiling, too late, and as he twisted in the dark room, he suddenly became very dizzy, losing any sense of direction, any orientation to the walls and floors. A thick arm snaked around his throat, choking off his nausea along with his breath. Max got hold of a thumb and managed to pull it halfway loose, but he had no leverage at all.

He swung his elbows forcefully and futilely as black dots swam before his eyes like collapsing stars in the darkened room.

Then the darkness became absolute.

HE EXPERIENCED a floating, disconnected sensation, like being in the sensory deprivation tanks they'd used for some of his conditioning experiments. Max had hated the feeling then, of being lost, detached, and he hated it now. Then light knifed down into one of his eyes and all his pains awoke at once.

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"Do you hear me, Lieutenant Nikomedes?"

"Yes," croaked Max. His throat felt raw. The light flicked off, then stabbed into the other eye. "That hurts."

"I should imagine that it's the least of your hurts. Has the painkiller worn off completely then?"

"I hope so, because if it hasn't you should just kill me now." His throat felt crushed and his kidneys ached like hell. The light went off and Max's eyes adjusted to the setting. He was in the sickbay with the Doc hovering over him. His name was Noyes, and he was only a medtech, but the crew still called him Doc. The service was short of surgeons. Command didn't want to spare one for this voyage.

"Your pupils look good," Noyes continued. "There's a ruptured blood vessel in the right eye. It's not pretty, but the damage is superficial. We had some concern about how long you'd been without oxygen when you came in."

Yeah, thought Max. He was concerned too. "So how long was it?"

"Not long. Seconds, maybe. A couple of the shooters found you unconscious in the gym."

"And so they brought the Corpse to sickbay?"

"You know that nickname?" Noyes administered an injection and Max's pain lessened. "Whoever attacked you knew what he was doing. He cut off your air supply without crushing your windpipe or leaving any fingerprint type bruises on your throat. You're lucky — the shooters did chest compressions as soon as they found you and got you breathing again."

So this wasn't just a warning. Someone had tried to kill him, and failed. Unless the shooters were in on it. But who would do it and why? His hand shot up to his breast pocket. Gordet's note with the secret codes was still there.

"What's that?" asked Noyes, noticing the gesture.

"A list of suspects," replied Max. He wondered if someone had followed him from Engineering. "Did you hear the one about the political officer who was killed during wargame exercises?"

Suspicion flickered across the Doc's face. "No," he said slowly.

"They couldn't call it friendly fire because he had no friends."

Noyes didn't laugh. He was young, barely thirty, if that. But his face

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was worn, and he had a deep crease between his eyes. "Can I ask you a direct question?"

"If it's about who did this — "

"No. It's about the ship's mission."

"I may not be able to answer."

"It's just the crew, you know what they're saying, that this is a suicide mission. We're supposed to sneak into Adarean space, nuke their capital, and then blow ourselves up, vaporize the evidence."

"Ah." No, Max hadn't heard that one yet, though he supposed he should have thought of it himself. Sometimes there were disadvantages to knowing inside information; it limited one's ability to imagine other possibilities. "We could blow up their capital, but their military command is space-based, decentralized. That kind of strike wouldn't touch them at all. That doesn't make any sense, Doc."

"It doesn't have to make sense for the service to order it." Noyes laughed, a truncated little puff of air. "I was scheduled for leave, I was supposed to be getting married on my leave, and I got yanked off the transport and put on this ship without a word of explanation, and then found out I was going to be gone for a year and a half. So don't tell me the service only gives orders that make any sense."

Max had no answer for that. He knew how orders were.

"Is this a suicide mission?" asked Noyes. "Tell me straight. The shooters think that's why someone tried to kill you, because they don't have to worry about consequences when they get back home."

And they could die knowing they'd offed an officer. There were definitely a few of that type on board. But Max didn't think it was that random. "And if it is a suicide mission?"

The medtech's face grew solemn. "Then I want to send some kind of message back to Suzan. I don't want her to think I simply disappeared on her. I don't want her to live the rest of her life with that."

Noyes couldn't be the only one having those thoughts. No wonder there was tension on the ship. "This isn't a suicide mission," Max said firmly.

"Your word on that?"

"Yes." He would have to try to kill this rumor. Even if it proved to be true. Max touched his pocket again. What exactly were the secret orders? He thought he knew them, but maybe he didn't.

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Noyes shook his head. "Too bad you're the political officer. Everyone knows your word can't be trusted." He handed Max a bottle of pills. "The captain wants to see you on the bridge right away. Take one of these if you feel weak, or in pain, and then report back to sickbay next shift."

Max sat up, and noticed his pants pockets were inside out. So someone had been searching him after all and the shooters interrupted them. Unless that too was part of the ruse. For now, he'd stick to the simpler explanation.

Noyes helped him to his feet. "I ought to keep you for observation," he said.

"No," replied Max. "I'm fine." I'm as rotten a liar as Rucker is, he thought. He wondered if the first lieutenant had changed his mind. Or changed his allegiances.

The door opened and Simco waited outside. His bulk seemed to fill the small corridor. He held his hands folded behind his back. "Captain assigned me to be your guard, sir. He asks you not to speak about this incident while I'm investigating it. He also requires your immediate attention on the bridge."

"The assignment comes a little too late, apparently, Sergeant," murmured Max. He gestured for Simco to lead the way.

"You first, sir."

Trouble never came looking for him face to face, thought Max as he led the way through the corridors. It always came sneaking up behind.

A DOUBLE CREW packed the already tight bridge because of shift change, giving reports to one another in low tones.

No one but the captain bothered to look up when Max entered, and even he only glanced away from the scope for a second. Vents hissed above the muted beeps from the monitors. The two shooters Max had seen in the Black Forest were seated next to the tactics officer. Max waited to make eye contact with them, to say thanks, but they were so absorbed in their work they didn't notice him. He gave up waiting, and slid over to stand by Petoskey.

"It's about damn time, Nikomedes," growled Petoskey.

"I had a slight accident."

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"Well I have a slight problem. The incoming ship boosted. They're in some kind of a hurry. So our window of opportunity is here, and it's closing fast."

He hasn't made up his mind yet, Max realized. "Have they detected us?"

"No. We're between them and the rings. They don't see us because we're floating dead, and because they don't expect to see anyone out here."

Max remained silent, running the calculations through his head. Outback's presence would not affect the Jesusalem's claim to the system, only the possible success of their mission through Adarean space.

"'War is an extension of political policy with military force,'" prompted Petoskey, quoting regulations.

And it was the job of the political officer to be the final arbiter of policy. This was exactly the type of unforeseen situation that created the need for political officers on ships. "What are our options?"

Petoskey shifted his chewing tobacco into a spot below his lower lip. "Chevrier says we could power up and hit them with the lasers, but we wouldn't get more than one or two shots. I don't like our chances at this distance. We could launch the nuclears at them. They'd see them coming, but we could bracket them so that they'll still take on a killer dose of radiation even if we don't score a direct hit. Or we could do nothing."

"What are your concerns?"

He sucked the tobacco juice through his teeth. "The last I heard officially, Outback was one of our trading partners."

"We have met the enemy," Max mused softly, "and they are us."

Petoskey scowled. "But Outback also trades with Adares. If they find our dive to their system, they'll let the Adareans know about it and that endangers our mission. So what's the politically correct thing for me to do?"

"I would suggest that we haven't been tasked with guarding the system or the other wormhole. I would point out that there are other ships in place specifically to do just that." He paused. "And as long as we dive undetected, our mission isn't really endangered."

Petoskey leaned back and straightened so that his head nearly scraped the pipes. He slammed the scope back into its slot and stared hard at Max. "So we let them pass?"

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"They've got a second ship outside our range. We pop this one and the other one sees us, then Jesusalem could face a war on two fronts." Although they weren't *technically* at war with Adares any longer, the capital was filled with rumors of war. "Politically, we're not ready to handle that."

"I'll tell you one thing," said Petoskey, with a slight shudder that mixed revulsion with unease. "I'm glad not to use the nukes. Those are dirty weapons to use. On people."

"I fail to see any difference," said Max. "Two kinds of fire. Lasers or nukes, they would be equally dead."

Petoskey had a lidded cup taped to the conduits on the wall. He pulled it off, spit into it, and taped it back up again. Pausing, so he could change the subject. "I understand that *you* were nearly dead a little while ago, Nikomedes. Simco has one of his men guarding Reedy."

"Why?" asked Max. Had the ensign been attacked also?

"Spy or not, it's obvious she's trying to get back at you for your comments in quarters the other day. I asked around and found out what she did to Vance. Shows what happens when you don't keep women in their place. Before I had her locked up, I wanted to make certain this wasn't something arranged between the two of you. Some kind of duel. Not that I thought it was, but...."

He thought it might be, finished Max to himself. Or hoped it might be. "It wasn't Reedy as far as I know. But let Simco's man watch her while Simco investigates. If Reedy's guilty, maybe she'll give herself away."

"Shouldn't have a woman on board anyway, even if she is language qualified. We can't afford dissension on a voyage like this one. I will personally execute anyone who endangers this mission. I don't care if it is a junior officer."

Or a woman, thought Max. "Understood," he answered. He looked up one last time, to see if he could catch the shooters' eyes. That's when he noticed Rucker and Gordet staring at him. They had been whispering to one another and stopped. "In fact, I think I'll head down to the radio room right now."

"You're dismissed from duty until Doc says you've recovered. And Simco or one of his men will stay with you at all times."

That was not what Max wanted, not at all. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

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Petoskey nodded, dismissing him.

Max began to wish that whoever had attacked him had done a better job.

HE WENT TO the secure radio room and all three of the intelligence officers stopped talking and turned toward the doorway. It's the Political Officer Effect, thought Max.

"What happened to your face?" Lukinov asked.

"I fought the law and the law won," Max answered impulsively.

Burdick burst out laughing. Even Lukinov smiled. "Why does that sound so damned familiar?" he asked.

"*Judas's Chariot*," answered Burdick. "The vid. It was one of Barabbas's lines."

"Yeah, yeah, I remember that one now. It had Oliver Whatshisname in it. I got to meet him once, at a party, when he did that public information vid. Good man." He twisted around. The smell of his cologne nearly choked Max. "Seriously, Max, what happened? Why has the captain put a guard on one of my men?"

"Someone tried to kill me." Max was disappointed with the surprise in Lukinov's expression. In all of their expressions. Intelligence was supposed to know everything. "Captain suspects the ensign here."

"That's ridiculous!" Lukinov rolled his eyes. Anger flashed across Reedy's face.

"It wasn't my suggestion," Max replied. "But if you don't mind my asking, which one of you is just coming on shift?"

"I am, sir," Reedy answered immediately.

"And where were you?"

"In her quarters sleeping," interjected Lukinov. "Where else would she have been?"

"You were there with her?" No one wanted to answer that accusation, so Max slid past it. "You two usually work one shift together, and Burdick takes the other, right?"

The senior officer hesitated. "I doubled shifted with Burdick because of the information we were getting."

So. Reedy had been alone. Not that Max suspected her of the attack.

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But now he'd have to. Maybe he'd misestimated her in the first place. "What information is that?"

"The other Outback ship is doing some kind of military research defending the wormhole. Based on what we're overhearing from observers in the shuttles. We've got a name on the second ship. It's the *Jiang Qing*, same class as the other one." He paused. "You aren't going to try to tell me that Jiang Qing was one of Napoleon's generals too, are you, Max?"

"Why not?" asked Max flatly. "Historically, Earth has had women generals for centuries. Jesusalem was the only planet without a mixed service."

Lukinov's lip curled. "We finally tracked down Deng Xiaopeng. He and this Jiang Qing woman were both part of the Chinese revolution. Reedy found the information."

"The Chinese communist revolution," clarified the ensign. "They were minor figures, associated with Mao. Both were charged with crimes though they helped bring about important political changes that led to the second revolution."

"Ah," said Max. A wave of pain shot through him. If his legs had been supporting his weight, they would surely have buckled. "Please cooperate with Sergeant Simco until we can get this straightened out. Now, if you will excuse me."

He didn't wait for their response, but turned back to the hall. Simco waited at parade rest, his hands behind his back. Another trooper stood beside him.

"I'm going to return to my cabin now," Max said.

"I've detailed Rambaud here to watch you while I begin my investigation," Simco replied. Rambaud was a smaller but equally muscled version of his superior officer. "I'll be rotating all my men through this duty until we find the culprit."

"Keeping them sharp?" Max said.

Simco nodded. "A knife can't cut if you don't keep it sharp."

"I couldn't agree more." Max barely noticed the other man shadowing him through the narrow maze of corridors. When he reached his room, he took a double dose of the doctor's painkillers, added one from his own stock, and washed them all down with a gulp of warm, flat water. He looked in the bathroom mirror at his damaged eye. That was when he

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started to shake. He had the ludicrous sensation that he was going to fall down, so he grabbed hold of the sink and tried to steady himself. Eventually it passed, but not before his breath came out in ragged gasps.

He'd come too close to dying this time. And why?

The rumor of the suicide mission still bothered him, and so did the problem of Reedy. When he drifted off to sleep, he dreamed that he was wandering an empty vessel searching for someone who was no longer aboard, through corridors that were kinked and slicked like the intestines of some animal. They started shrinking, squeezing the crates and boxes that filled them into a solid mass, as Max tried to find his way out. The last section dead-ended in a mirror, and when he paused to look into its silver surface he saw a bloody eye above a pyramid.

He woke up shivering and nauseous. According to the clock, he'd slept nearly four and a half hours, but he didn't believe it. He wasn't inclined to believe anything right now.

He rose and dressed himself. He needed better luck. If it wouldn't come looking for him, he'd have to go looking for it.

DOWN IN THE very bottom of the ship rested an observation chamber that contained the only naked ports in the entire vessel. Max went down there to think, dutifully followed by Simco's watchdog.

Max paused outside the airlock. "You can wait here."

"I'm supposed to stay with you, sir."

"The lights are off, it's empty," said Max, realizing as soon as the words were out of his mouth what had happened the last time he went into a dark room alone. "If someone's waiting in there to kill me, then you've got them trapped. You'll get a commendation."

Rambaud relented. Max entered the room, closing the hatch behind him. It sealed automatically, reminding Max of the sound of a prison cell door shutting.

Outside the round windows stretched the infinite expanse of space. The sun was a small, cold ember in a charcoal-colored sky dominated by the vast and ominous bulk of Big Brother. They were close enough that Max could see crimson storms raging on its surface, swirling hurricanes larger than Jesusalem itself. He counted three moons spinning around the

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planet, and great rings of dust, as if everything in space was drawn into satellites around the self-consuming fire of its mass.

A quiet cough came from the rear of the compartment.

Max pirouetted, and saw another man floating cross-legged in the air. As he unfolded and came to attention, light glinted off the jack that sat lodged in his forehead like a third eye. It was the spongediver, the ship's pilot, Patchett.

"At ease, Patchett," said Max.

Patchett nodded toward the port as he clasped his hands behind his back. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"It's no place for a human being to live," Max said. "Give me a little blue marble of a planet any day instead."

The pilot smiled. "That figures."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the political officer, and politics is always about the place we live, how we live together." He gestured at the sweep of the illuminated rings. "But this is why I joined the service — to explore, to see space."

"Has it been worth it?"

"Too much waiting, too much doing nothing." Patchett shifted his position, rotating a quarter circle. "The diving makes it worthwhile."

"Good," murmured Max, looking away.

"You and I are alike that way. We both are the most useless men on the ship *except* for that one moment when we're the only one qualified to do the job." He stared out the port. "What happened to you, that was wrong, sir."

Max gazed out the window also, saying nothing.

"I'd guess," Patchett said, "that I've been in the service as long as you have. Nearly twenty years."

"Just past thirty years now," Max replied. It wasn't all in the official records, but thirty years total. A very long time. Patchett clearly wanted to say something more. "What is it?" asked Max. "Speak freely."

Patchett exhaled. "Things have been going downhill the past few years, sir. The wrong men in charge, undermining everything we hoped to accomplish in the Revolution. They all want war. They forget what the last one was like."

"Are you sure you should be telling this to your political officer?"

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"You may be the only one I *can* say it to. You have to know it already. Petoskey's an excellent captain, don't get me wrong, sir. But he's too young to remember what the last war was like."

They hung there in the dark, weightless, silent, watching the giant spin on its axis. If Patchett was right, there was one moment in the voyage when only Max's skills would make a difference. But what moment, and what kind of difference, there was no way to know in advance.

When Max went to the med bay to check in with Noyes he found Simco sitting — more or less — at the exam table. "I'd salute," Simco said, "but Doc here's treating a sprain."

"Dislocation," corrected Noyes.

"What happened?" asked Max.

Simco grinned. "I scheduled extra combat training for my men. Want to make sure they're ready in case they run into whoever attacked you. It doesn't really count as a good workout unless someone dislocates something."

Noyes snorted.

"Plus, Doc here says that we have to exercise at least an hour a day or we'll start losing bone and muscle mass."

"Nobody's had to deal with prolonged weightlessness in a couple of hundred years," added Noyes. "I'm only finding hints of the information I need in our database. The nausea, vertigo, lethargy — that I expected and was prepared for. But we're already seeing more infections, shortness of breath, odd stuff. And we've got orders to spend *months* like this? It's madness. Take it easy on this thumb for a few more days, Simco." He went to lay his stim-gun on the table and it floated off sideways across the room. "Damn. Not again."

Max snatched it out of the air and handed it back to the Doc. "Any word on who my attacker was?" he asked Simco.

"No." The sergeant blew out his breath. "But I did hear that you picked a fight with Chevrier down in Engineering."

"Nothing even close to that."

"Good. He's a big man, completely out of your weight class."

"Right now, we're all in the same weight class."

That won Max a laugh from both Simco and Noyes. "Still, if you go

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see him again, about anything, please inform me first," the sergeant said.

"You'll know about it before I do," promised Max.

After the Doc finished checking him, Max went back through the crate-packed corridors toward his quarters. On the way, he passed Reedy, whose mouth quirked in a brief smile as Max squeezed past her.

"What do you find so funny, Ensign?" Max growled.

Reedy's eyes flicked, indicating the trooper following her and the one behind Max. "For a second there, sir, I wondered which of us was the real prisoner."

Very perceptive. She had an edge to her voice that reminded him of Chevrier. He recalled that she had shown a strong aversion to confinement after the incident with Vance. "Remember who you're speaking to, Ensign!"

"Yes, sir. It won't happen again, sir."

"See that it doesn't."

He went into his room and swallowed another painkiller. Even if the moment came when he could make a difference, would he be able to get away from his minders long enough to do it?

Eight more shifts, two more days, and nothing.

Max had no appetite, the food all tasted bland to him. He couldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time. If he turned the lights off, he'd wake in a panic, disoriented, unsure of his location. But if he slept with the lights on, they poked at the edge of his consciousness, prodding him awake. He tried to exercise one hour out of every two shifts, but everything seemed tedious. It just felt wrong, empty motions with nothing to push against.

On the bridge, he asked Petoskey if it was still necessary to have a guard.

"The attack's still unsolved," Petoskey said. "Until Simco brings me the man — or woman — who did it, I want you protected."

Max had the sinking feeling that might be for the rest of the voyage. "How are the repairs going?"

"Chevrier replaced all the chips in the dead array with new ones, but something failed when he tested it. He has an idea for rebuilding the chips with some kind of silicon alloy crystal. Says he can grow it as long as we

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stay weightless. Some other kind of old tech. Inorganic. He tried to explain it to me, but he's the only one who really understands it."

"Can we wait that long?"

"We can't power up to jump as long as those Outback ships are in the vicinity. They'd see us — and the wormhole — in a microsecond. So far they still haven't detected our buoy. Or if they have, they just took it for a pulsar signal." Which was the idea, after all. Petoskey tugged hard at his beard. There were dark stains of sleeplessness under his eyes. "Don't you have some work to do, some reports to write?"

He meant it as a dismissal. Max was willing to be dismissed. He was still no closer to catching his traitor, and his luck couldn't have been more execrable.

He went to the ship's library to read. Rambaud, his trooper again this shift, had no interest in reading or studying vids of any kind. He writhed in almost open pain as Max made it clear that he intended to stay at a desk alone for several hours. Max decided that it wouldn't be murder if he bored Simco's men to death.

He sat there, scanning Fier's monograph on the Adarean war, skimming through the casualty lists in the appendixes, thinking about some of the worst battles, early on, and the consequences of war, when a voice intruded on his contemplations.

"...bored as hell down here. Uh-huh. Wargames. That sounds interesting. Can you understand that Outback lingo?"

Rambaud was whispering on the comlink to his compatriot in charge of Reedy. Max let the conversation turn to complaints about the exercise regimen and weightlessness before he flipped off his screen and rose to go.

He headed for the intelligence radio room. The scent of Lukinov's imported cologne drifted out the open door into the corridor. Max paused at the doorway. Inside, the trooper floated behind Lukinov and Reedy. He wore a set of earphones.

"So this is how well you keep secrets?" asked Max.

The trooper saw Max, yanked the earphones out of his ear, and handed them back to an ebullient Lukinov. "Wait until you hear this, Max!" Lukinov said.

The trooper tried to squeeze by Max without touching him. Max stayed firmly in his way, making him as uncomfortable as possible.

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"Rambaud," he said to his own man, "I believe I left my palm-pad down in the library by accident. Retrieve it for me and bring it to this room immediately so I can record this conversation."

Rambaud hesitated before answering. "Yes, sir."

The other trooper went over Max's head and took up station outside the door. Max kicked the door shut and latched it.

"What's going on with the spongediver?" asked Max.

"They're testing a new laser deflector, using it for wormhole defense." Lukinov grinned. "Go ahead and listen."

Max picked up the headphones and fit the wires into his ears. Pilots chattered with tactics officers, describing the kind of run they were simulating. No wonder Outback outfitted their survey ships with the newest military equipment. The blind side of a wormhole dive was probably the only place in the galaxy they could test any new weapons without being observed. "Very standard stuff here," he said after a moment. "Is there just one channel of this?"

"Their scientists are on the other channel, the one Reedy's monitoring. But don't you see what an advantage this gives us if we can steal it? We can attack Adares with impunity and keep them from diving into our system."

Max switched the channel setting to the one Reedy listened to. "Do unto others before they do unto you?"

"Exactly!" replied Lukinov.

Reedy's eyes went wide open. She started tapping the desk to get their attention. "Sir," she said. "There's something you should...."

"Not right now," said Max.

Lukinov frowned at him. "Now see here — "

"No, you see here. Has the captain been informed of this?"

"Not yet," replied Lukinov.

"You invite some grunt in here to listen to information that will certainly be classified top secret before you notify the captain?" He sneered at Lukinov, pausing long enough to listen to the scientists talk. "You can be sure that my Department will file a record of protest on our return. In the meantime, I better go get the captain."

Lukinov popped out of his seat. "No, I'll do that. I was just planning to do that anyway, if you hadn't interrupted."

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"Sir," repeated Reedy. "*Sirs*."

"Ensign," said Max, "Shut. Up."

The ensign nodded mutely, her eyes shaped like two satellite dishes trying to pick up a signal.

"I'm coming with you, Lukinov," Max said.

"No, you aren't, *Lieutenant*," snapped the intelligence officer. "I'm the one man on this ship you can't give direct orders to and don't you forget it."

Max saluted, a gesture sharp enough to have turned into a knife hand strike at the other man's throat. Lukinov stormed out of the room. Max turned back to the ensign, who simply stared at him.

"They just broadcast the complete specifications," said Reedy. "They were checking for field deformation — "

"I know that," said Max. And then he did something he never expected to do, not on this voyage. He said aloud the secret intelligence code word for "render all assistance." Silently, to himself, he added a prayer that it was current, and that Reedy would recognize it.

"Wh-what did you say?" she stammered.

Max repeated the code word for "render all assistance" while he pulled off his earphones and reached in his pocket for his multi-tool. His fingers found nothing, and he realized that it had been missing since his attack. "And give me a screwdriver," he added.

Reedy handed over the tool. "But...but...."

Max ignored her. In thirty seconds, he'd disconnected the power and disassembled the outer case of the radio. "Give me the laser," he said.

The ensign's hands shook as she complied.

"I need two new memory chips and the spare pod." Reedy just stared at him, uncomprehending. "Now!" spit Max, and the ensign dove for the equipment box.

Max shoved the loaded chips into his pockets and snapped the replacements into their slots as Reedy handed them over. The radio was still a mess of pieces when someone rapped on the door.

"Stall them!" hissed Max.

The rap came again and the door cracked open. Rambaud pushed his head in partway. "Here's your palm-pad, sir."

"I'll take it," said Reedy, grabbing it and shoving the door shut on him.

"Thanks!" called Max. He'd lost one of the screws, and when he

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looked up from the equipment to see if it was floating somewhere, he was temporarily disoriented. His stomach did a flip-flop and his head spun in a circle. "Shit!"

Rambaud pushed back on the door. "Are you safe in there, sir? I'm coming in."

Reedy wedged herself against the wall to block the door.

Max heard a plain thump as Rambaud bounced against it. He saw the screw floating near his ankles and scooped it up. He fixed the cover and powered the machine up again. Reedy grunted as the door pushed against her, cracking open. "I'm fine," Max said loudly.

Rambaud nodded, but he stood outside the cracked door peering in.

Reedy panted, caught herself, controlled it. A thousand questions formed and died on her lips. Max had taken the leap, and now he had to see how far that leap would take him.

"Ensign," he whispered.

"Yes, sir?"

"From this moment forth," his lips barely moved, "you will consider me your sole superior officer."

Her eyes jumped to the door. "Sir? But — "

"That is a direct order."

"Yes, sir."

"You will not tell anyone — "

But he did not get the chance to tell Reedy what she should and shouldn't say. The door swung open and Lukinov entered, followed by Captain Petoskey. Lukinov grinned like a party girl full of booze. "Wait until you hear this," he said. He put his headphones on, and handed one to Petoskey as Reedy slid quickly back into her place.

They listened for a moment. Petoskey squinted his eyes, and rounded his shoulders even more than usual. "Sounds like they're bringing the shuttles in, getting ready to leave. Radioing a safe voyage message to their other ship. What was I supposed to hear?"

"They're testing a new deflector for wormhole defense. If we attack their ship and kill them, we can take it. Their other ship will be stuck in-system and we can nuke them."

"Captain," said Max.

"Yes?"

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"I didn't hear any evidence of this deflector. I can't recommend an attack."

Lukinov frantically punched commands into his keypad. "Let me back up to an hour ago." His face went as blank as the records he was trying to access. "I can't seem to find it. Reedy, what's going on here?"

"Sir," she muttered, with a pleading glance at Max, "uh, I don't know, sir."

"She's covering up," said Max.

Three faces stared at him with variations of disbelief.

"Look at the battery, it's not properly grounded." It was an awful explanation, but the best that Max could come up with on the spot. "Reedy was moving some equipment around, hit it with something. I didn't see what. Sparks flew and the screens all went dead. She got them back up right away, but she probably wiped the memories."

"Ensign," Lukinov said coldly. "Explain yourself."

Reedy's mouth hung open. She didn't know what to say. Betrayal was written all over her face.

Petoskey took off his headset. "Lukinov, I trust you to take care of this. Nikomedes...."

"Yes, sir?"

Petoskey couldn't seem to think of any orders to give him. "I have to go talk to Chevrier. We have our mission. With the second ship out of the way, we have to prepare to dive."

Max followed Petoskey out into the corridor, but returned to his room to stash the stolen memory. Only two things mattered now: getting the information to his superior, and keeping Lukinov from getting it to his. It needed to be used as a defensive weapon, not as an excuse to start a war. Lukinov had access to the radio and official channels. Max didn't. That stacked the cards in Lukinov's favor.

He had to do something with it soon, before they jumped to Adarean space. And he had to hope that a baby-faced ensign just out of the Academy didn't fold under pressure and give him away. It was like a game of Blind Man's Draw. Max had already put everything he had into the pot.

There was nothing else he could do at this point except play the card that he was dealt.

* * *

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Meal time. Max sat by himself, as usual, at his own narrow table in the galley. Even the trooper guarding him sat with some of the other crewmen.

Lukinov entered, saw Max, and came straight over to him. "Reedy won't say that you were lying, but you were," the intelligence officer said. "Not that it matters. The machines are buggered, the data's all gone. Even Burdick can't find it."

Max had a blank sheet in his pocket. He pulled it out, and a stylus, and passed it over to Lukinov. This was the way duels were proposed at the Academy. According to the Academy's cover story, it was the way Reedy had arranged to meet with Vance.

Lukinov looked at the sheet, then scratched "observation room" and a time two hours distant on it. He pushed it back over to Max, who shook his head, and wrote "reactor room."

"Why there?" asked the intelligence officer.

"They've got cameras there, but no mikes. It's off limits to Simco's troopers, but not to us. We won't be there long."

"So this is just to be a private conversation? I should leave my weapons behind?"

"I wish you would."

"More's the pity," said Lukinov, and stormed out.

Max was putting his tray away, trying to resolve his other problem, when Simco came in. "Lukinov won't let us throw the ensign in the brig, not yet. But he thought it was best if I stuck with you personally in the meantime."

Perfect, thought Max, just perfect.

TWO HOURS HAD never stretched out to such an eternity before in all Max's life. Simco escorted him to his quarters and joined him inside.

"Do you want to follow me into the head and shake it dry for me?" asked Max on his way into the bathroom.

Simco laughed, but remained in the other room. Max retrieved a bottle of pills and an old pair of nail clippers from the medicine cabinet, putting them in his pocket. Then he led Simco on a long, roundabout trip through the corridors that ended up on the floor of the Black Forest. He stopped when he got there and snapped his fingers.

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"I forgot something," Max said. "You don't mind if I borrow that multi-tool in your pocket, do you?"

Simco stuffed his hand automatically into his pants, wrapped it around the bulge there, and froze. "Sorry, sir, I don't have one with me," he said, grinning. "Got one in my locker. Or do you want to hit Engineering to borrow one?"

"No, it's nothing I need that badly." He jumped. "Meet you up top, in the exercise room." He grabbed hold of the service ladder outside one of the missile shafts, and pulled himself up. He used his momentum to spin, kicking off from the side of the shaft, and shot like a rocket toward the ceiling.

"Hold up there," called Simco, halfway up the stairs.

Max ducked into the upper corridor. He dove through the hall as fast as he could, past the exercise room, down the access shaft, and back out the corridor below, returning to the missile room. He watched Simco's feet disappear above him into the top corridor, and then he flew straight across the cavern to the section over Engineering, opened a portside hatch, and closed it again after himself.

A long time ago Max had modified his nail clippers to function as a makeshift tool. Bracing himself against the wall, he used it now to remove the grille from the ceiling vent — it was the supply duct for the HEPA filters in the clean hood corner of the battery room directly below. He squeezed inside, feet first, pulling the grille after him. There was no way to reattach it, but with no gravity he didn't need to. He simply pulled it into place and it stayed there.

It was an eighteen-inch duct and he was a small man. Even so, he felt like toothpaste being forced back into the tube. He had to twist sideways and flip over to get past the L-curve, but after that it was a straight trip down to the reactor room. With his arms pinned above his head, and no gravity to help him, he writhed downward like a rat caught in a drainpipe. He reached bottom, unable to go any further. His kicks had no effect at all and his heart began to race as he wondered if he'd be trapped inside the duct. Finally, by pressing his elbows out into the corners, and hooking one foot on the lip where the vent teed out horizontally, he was able to push the other foot downward until the duct tore open.

He eased downward into the plenum space above the hood ceiling and

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kicked through the tiles. When he finally lowered himself into the battery room he was drenched in sweat and his pants were ripped in the thigh. He hadn't even noticed. He undid his belt and looked at the scrape on his leg. It was mostly superficial. Not much blood.

He leaned in the corner, with the hood's softwalls pulled back, catching his breath. The cameras were all installed to monitor the reactor, so they faced the center of the room. Most of them close-upped on specific pieces of equipment. He eased out, pushing himself up toward the high ceiling.

He glanced at his chrono. Already seven minutes past his meeting time with Lukinov. He waited two more minutes before the hatch popped open. He had a split second to decide what he would do if it was one of the engineers.

But a familiar balding head poked through the door. Max eased out of the hood area. "Hey, Lukinov."

"Max?" The other man twisted around to see him. He entered, closing the hatch behind him. "How the hell did you get in here? Chevrier's guard at the door gave me the runaround, swore he hadn't seen you. The mate watching the monitors said you never came in here either. What are you, some damn spook?"

Max ignored the questions. "You wanted to talk to me about the radio room. It was me. I stole the memory chips."

Lukinov came toward him, pale with fury. "You did *what*? By god, I'll see you shot."

"Intelligence won't touch me," said Max. "Not for this."

"I'll get Political Education to do it, you goddamn weasel," Lukinov vowed. He launched himself toward Max, keeping a hand against the wall to orient himself. "Your boss, Mallove, is a personal friend of mine. He won't like — "

Max jumped, tucking his knees and spinning as he sailed in the air. He wrapped his belt around Lukinov's throat, pivoted, twisting the belt as he pulled himself back to the floor. The motion jerked Lukinov upside down so that he floated in the air like a child's balloon.

"Your boss, Drozhin," whispered Max, "doesn't like the way you've been selling Intelligence's secrets out to Political Education and War."

Drozhin was Max's boss too. He'd moled Max in Political Education as soon as the new Department formed.

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Lukinov panicked. He thrashed his arms and legs, disoriented, trying to make contact with any surface, clutching futilely at Max, who was behind his back and below him. Max twisted the belt, pinching the carotid arteries and cutting off blood flow to the brain. Lukinov was unconscious in about seven seconds. His body just went still. He was dead a few seconds later.

Drozhin had ordered Max to watch Lukinov, not kill him, but he couldn't see any other way around it. He shoved the body toward the corner, under the vent, and put his belt back on.

Still nobody at the hatch. Maybe they hadn't noticed. Maybe they were summoning Simco. There'd be no denying this one, not if he'd missed the location of any cameras.

But he had no time to think about failure. He didn't want anyone looking closely at Lukinov's body and he didn't want the ship making the jump to Adares. Intelligence was publicly part of the war party, but Drozhin believed that war would destroy Jesusalem and wanted it sabotaged at all costs. Max took the medicine bottle from his pocket and removed the two pills that weren't pills. He popped them into his mouth to warm them — they tasted awful — while he removed the wire and blasting cap from the bottle's lid.

He couldn't blow any main part of the reactor, he understood that much. But the cooling circuit used water pipes, and a radioactive water spill could scuttle the jump. Max darted in, fixed the explosive to a blue-tagged pipe, plugged the wire in it, and hurried back to the hood. He pushed Lukinov's corpse in the direction of the explosive before he climbed through the hole into the vent.

There was a soft boom behind him.

Max cranked his neck to peer down between his feet and saw the water spray in a fine mist, filling the air like fog. All the radiation alarms blared at once.

They sounded far off at first while he wiggled upward. He thought he was sweating, but realized that the busted air flow was drawing some of the water up through the shaft. Droplets pelleted him with radiation, and that made him crawl faster. He got stuck in the bend for a moment, finally squeezing through, and thrusting the vent cover out of the way without checking first to see if anyone was in the corridor. But it was empty — so far his luck held! He retrieved the grille and screwed it back into place.

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One of the alarms was located directly beside him. Its wailing made his pulse skip.

He emerged into the shaft of the weapons compartment as men raced both ways, toward the accident and away from it. No one noticed him. He was headed across the void toward his quarters when someone called his name.

"Hey, Nikomedes!"

He saw the medtech, Noyes, down by the corridor that led to Engineering. "What is it, Doc?"

"You don't have your comet, do you?"

Max touched the empty spot on his breast pocket. "No. Why?"

"Radiation emergency!" he screamed. "You're drafted as the surgeon's assistant — come on!"

Max considered ignoring the command, but according to regulations, Doc was right. Anyone who wasn't Vacuum and Radiation qualified was designated an orderly to help treat those who were. Plus it gave him an alibi. He jumped toward the bottom of the Black Forest and joined Noyes.

"Here, carry this kit," Noyes said, handing over a box of radiation gear as he went back across the hall to grab another.

"Where is it?" asked Max. He held the gear close, covering the rip in his pants. "What's going on?"

"Don't know. The com's down again. But it has to be the reactor."

Nobody guarded the main hatch to Engineering so the two men went straight in. A crowd gathered in the monitor room, spilling out into the corridor. Noyes pushed straight through, and Max followed along behind him. Chevrier was shaking a crewman by the throat.

" — what the hell did you let him in there for?"

"He ordered me to!" the man complained. It was DePuy.

"There's water everywhere!" another one of the men yelled, coming back from the direction of the reactor room hatch. "The reactor's overheating fast!"

"It's already past four hundred cees," said one of the men at the monitors.

Chevrier tried to fling DePuy at the wall, but they just flopped a short distance apart. The chief engineer turned toward the rest of crew in disgust.

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Rucker, the first lieutenant, showed up behind Max. "Captain wants a report — the com's down again!"

"That's because the reactor's overheating," Chevrier said. "The cooling system's busted."

"My God," said Rucker, invoking a deity he probably didn't believe in, thought Max.

Noyes slapped a yellow patch on the first lieutenant's shirt. "Radiation detectors, everyone. When they turn orange, you're in danger, means get out. Red means see me for immediate treatment." He handed some to Max. "Make sure everyone wears one."

"We've got to go in there, fix the pipe, and cool the reactor," said Chevrier. Some of the men started to protest. "Shut the fuck up! I'm asking for volunteers. And I'll be going in with you."

Rucker wiped the blond cowlick back off his forehead. "I'll go in," he said. Six other crewmen volunteered, most of them senior engineers. Max slapped radiation badges on those men first.

"Here's the plan." Chevrier pointed to pictures on the monitors. "We're going to shut off these valves here and here, cut out and replace this section of pipe — "

Noyes, looking over his shoulder, said, "That man in there ought to come out at once. He looks unconscious."

"That man is dead," said Chevrier, "and it's a good thing too, or I'd kill him. Then we're going to run a pipe through here, from the drinking water supply — "

A moan of dismay.

" — shut up! We'll take it from the number three reserve tank. That ought to be enough, and it won't contaminate the rest of the water. Once we get the main engine back up, we can make more water off the fuel cells."

Everyone had a badge now, and Max hung back with Noyes.

"I'd like someone to go in there and turn off these," Chevrier tapped spots on one of the monitors, "here, here, and here, while I get the repair set up."

"That'll be me," Rucker said. Like any junior officer, Max thought, trying to set a good example.

Chevrier gave him a nod. "This one here is tough. It'll take you a few

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minutes. It's right next to the reactor, and it's going to be hotter than hell." He gave Rucker the tools he needed and sent him off down the tube to the reactor room.

"I'll need a shower set up for decontamination," said Noyes.

Max found the air shower over by the other clean room, and showed him where it was. Noyes started setting up the lead-lined bags for clothing and equipment disposal.

By the time they went back to the monitor room, Chevrier had diagrammed his repair. His volunteers double-checked the equipment lined up in the hall. He sent others, who hadn't volunteered, to run a connector line from the fresh water tank. They were just getting ready to go in, when Rucker staggered back out. He looked...cooked. Like the worst sunburn Max had ever seen. His clothes were soaked, and glowing drops of water followed through the air in his wake. Noyes was there, swiping the droplets out of the air with a lead blanket. He wrapped Rucker in it, and started leading him toward the shower.

The lieutenant's badge was bright red.

One crewman bolted, another threw up. No one said anything about the smell, but one of the men took off his shirt and tried to catch the vomit as it scattered through the air.

Chevrier ripped his badge off. "Won't need this. Just one more distraction. If we're going to go swimming, we might as well go skinny-dipping." He stripped off his clothes and the other volunteers followed his example. "Can't handle tools in those damn vacuum suits anyway."

Anger, fear, those things were contagious, Max reflected. But so were courage and foolhardy bravery. He hoped the price was worth it.

He supposed he ought to be at decontamination, with Noyes, but he couldn't tear himself away from the monitors. There were no cameras aimed directly at the spot where the men were working with the pipes, but they passed in and out of the vids. The radioactive water pooled in the air, drop meeting drop, coalescing into larger blobs like mercury spilled on a lab table and just as poisonous. Or perhaps more like antibodies in a bloodstream. The men splashed into them as they moved and the water clung to their skin, searing wherever it touched.

Simco appeared at the door demanding a report for the captain. Max ignored him. Paint peeled off the overheating reactor, curling like bits of

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ash as it burned away. Water that hit its surface boiled away into steam, but the steam hit the other water, and became drops again instantly, a swirling rain that never fell. And, except for the dead tone of the radiation alarms, it all happened in silence, with no one in the monitor room speaking for long minutes, and no sound at all from the reactor room.

Noyes appeared beside Max. "That man needs to come out right now to have those burns treated," he said, tapping at one of the monitors. Glowing circles spun in slow lambent spirals on one man's buttocks.

Max laughed, a sound that came out of his mouth only as a breathless sigh. "Those are tattoos, Doc. Jets. Lightning bug juice impregnated in the subdermal cells."

"I've...never heard of that," said Noyes.

"It's supposed to bring a spacer safely home again."

"It's an abomination," blurted Noyes. The people of Jesusalem were against any mixing of the species. "Let's hope it does," he said.

"Indeed," replied Max.

DePuy stood beside them, shaking his head. "They're not getting it fixed."

Max began to think he'd miscalculated badly. He hadn't wanted anyone to look too closely at Lukinov's corpse. He wanted the ship to turn around and head back home. But with the main engine down and the back-up scuttled, they were in big trouble.

The hatch flew open and two men came out.

"They've been in there almost an hour," said Noyes, checking his chrono and calculating the damage to them.

"Is it done?" the men in the monitor room demanded. Max heard his own voice blurt out, "Is it fixed?"

But their faces were mute. The blistered flesh bubbled off as Doc wrapped them in blankets. Noyes helped one toward the shower, and Max took the other. "This is hopeless," Noyes said, trying to clean the men. "You have to go back there now and get the other men out before they die."

"I think we all die with the ship if they fail," said Max.

Rambaud, one of the troopers, appeared in the door. "Message from the captain, Doc. He wants you on the bridge."

"Tell him no."

The trooper's eyes kept flicking nervously to their badges. Max

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noticed his own was a sickly orange color. "Beg your pardon, Doc, but he's getting ready to abandon ship. If it's necessary."

"If he wants to give me an order, he can come down here and do it himself," said Noyes, shooting the burned man full of painkillers and starting an IV pump.

Rambaud fled.

Noyes stared after him. "They were going to suicide all of us anyway, for nothing. If I'm going to die, it might as well be doing my job."

"Hell, yes." Max's job was getting the specifications on the deflectors to Drozhin. If the captain took the escape shuttles and flew in system, then it was Max's duty to retrieve the chips from his quarters and get on a shuttle.

He followed Noyes back into the mouth of fire instead.

"They're coming out!" someone shouted.

Four more men this time, in worse shape than the others. Noyes had to hypospray them full of painkillers just to get them down to the shower. Max carried the man with the tattoos. They were coal black in his skin. Whatever lived in the cells and gave them their luminescence had been killed off by the radiation.

Before they finished the others, Chevrier was brought to them, covered with burn blisters, his hands raw meat, his eyes blind. He couldn't speak.

"Did he get it done?" shouted Max.

No one knew, so Max flew back toward the monitor room, where the handful of men who remained were arguing over the monitors. "The temperatures are still climbing," shouted DePuy. His voice had risen an octave in pitch. "I tell you he didn't get it running."

"What's going on?" asked Max.

"The pipes aren't open," said one of the electrician's mates.

"Somebody needs to go in there and turn this valve here," said DePuy. He pointed to a spot in the middle of the thick steam that surrounded the overheating reactor.

No one volunteered.

They were boys mostly, eighteen or nineteen, junior crewmen. They'd all seen the others carried out, had smelled the burned flesh, had listened to their weeping.

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The cut on Max's leg throbbed. His face and arms felt hot, burned. "I'll go in," he said.

Reactors were the only ship system he wasn't officially trained on, and all the reading he'd done before the voyage seemed inadequate to the task now. But he could go in there and turn a valve. He could do that much.

He went out to the corridor and found it blocked by a man in a vacuum suit, dragging a plasma cutter on a tether and reading the manual in his palm-pad. The man turned, his face gray behind the clear mask covering his face. It was Kulakov, the chief petty officer.

For a second Max thought the man would freeze up.

Kulakov looked back down at his diagram. "Be sure to seal the locks tight behind me," he said. "Send someone right now to levels three and four, portside, directly above us, to clear the corridors and seal the locks there. You have to do that!"

"Will do," said Max. Then, "Carry on."

Kulakov passed through the hatch, but when Max went to seal it, the fresh water supply tubing blocked it. "Damn," he said, with a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Damn, damn, damn."

Then DePuy was there beside him with a clamp and some cutters. He severed the pipe, and tossed the loose end through the hatch after Kulakov. Max sealed the door. "Did someone go to three and four?"

DePuy nodded. "But I'll go double-check," he added, glancing at the bare spot where Max's comet should have been. No, he was looking at Max's radiation badge. It was orange-red, bleeding into a bright crimson.

"You better head over to see Doc," said the electrician's mate at the monitors.

"Not yet," said Max.

On the video feed they watched Kulakov move methodically from point to point, comparing the hook-up and settings with the diagram on his palm-pad. It took him much longer than it had Chevrier when he was naked. A couple times it was clear that between the fog, and the loss of sensation caused by the suit, Kulakov became disoriented crossing an open space. He spun in circles until he found the right side up again. He reached the final valve but couldn't turn it. He peeled his gloves off, surrounded by the steam, and slowly cranked it over.

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The electrician's mate pounded the monitors. "It's running! Look at the temps drop!"

Max did, but he watched Kulakov too as he struggled to put his gloves back on, picked up the plasma cutter, and then burned a hole through the hull.

The weeping sound of the radiation alarms was joined by the sudden keening of the hull breech alarms. The whole ship shuddered, the bulkhead creaked beside him, and Max's ears popped.

But he kept his eyes fixed on the screen in the reactor room. The steam and all the radioactive water whooshed out of the ship. So did Lukinov's body. And so did Kulakov.

There was a dark, flat line straight across one of the screens, like a dead reading on a monitor.

Kulakov's tether.

"Hey look!" whispered one of the crewmen as Max entered the sick bay. "The Corpse is up and walking!"

They all laughed at that, the survivors, even Max. Chevrier was dead, and so was Rucker, and so were two other men. Of the six surviving men who'd received red badge levels of radiation exposure, only Max was strong enough to walk.

Kulakov sat in the middle of them. His hands were wrapped in bandages, two crooked, crippled hooks. Max nodded to him. "They still giving you a hard time?" he asked.

"You know it," grinned Kulakov.

"Well it's not fair that he should be the only one who gets leave while we're on this voyage," said one of the men.

"How can it be shore leave without a shore, that's what I want to know," said Kulakov.

They all laughed again, even Max. That was going to be a ship joke for a long time, how Kulakov got liberty — hanging on a tether outside the ship.

"Papa sent me down here with a message," said Max. Captain Petoskey, Papa, had only been to the sick bay once since the accident, and quickly. Most of the other crewman stayed away as if radiation sickness were something contagious.

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"What is it?" said Kulakov, the words thick in his throat.

"He wanted me to tell you that he's going to request that they rename the ship." The crewmen looked up at him seriously, all the humor gone from their eyes. "They're going to call it the *New Nazareth*."

New Nazareth had been nuked the worst by the Adareans. The land there still glowed in the dark.

Kulakov chuckled first, then the other men broke out laughing. Max saluted them, holding himself stiff for a full three seconds, then turned to go see Noyes. The medtech slumped in his chair, head sprawled across his arms on the desk, eyes closed. "I'm not sleeping," he muttered. "I'm just thinking."

"About your fiancée," asked Max, "waiting for you at home?"

"No, about the bone marrow cultures I've got growing in the vats, and the skin sheets, and the transplant surgery I have to do later this afternoon, that I've never done unassisted before, and the one I have to do tonight that I'm not trained to do at all." He twisted his head, peeking one eye out at Max. "And Suzan. Waiting for me. And the ship flying home. How are you feeling?"

"I'd be fine if you had any spare teeth," Max said, poking his tongue into the empty spots in his gums. That didn't feel as strange as having gravity under his feet again.

"They're in a drawer over by the sink," said Noyes. "Take two and call me in the morning."

MAX WALKED THROUGH corridors considerably less crowded than they had been a few days before. Almost everything inside the ship had received some radiation. The crewmen went crate to crate with geiger counters deciding what could be saved and what should be jettisoned. With the grav back on, the men's appetites returned. They also had a year's worth of supplies and only a short voyage ahead of them, so every meal became a feast. Some celebrated the fact that they were going home, and others the simple fact that they'd survived.

Only Captain Petoskey failed to join the celebration. When Max entered the galley, Petoskey wore the expression of a man on the way to the lethal injection chamber. Max couldn't say for sure if it was the condemned man's expression or the executioner's.

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Ensign Reedy sat on one side of a long table, with two troopers standing guard behind her. Petoskey and Commander Gordet sat on the opposite side with Simco standing at attention. Petoskey looked naked without his beard, shorn before they recorded these official proceedings. Burdick, the other intelligence officer, sat off to one end.

Petoskey invited Max to the empty seat beside him. "Are you sure you feel up to this, Nikomedes?"

"Doc says I'll be fine as long as it's brief."

"This'll be quick."

Petoskey turned on the recorder and read the regulations calling a board of inquiry. "Ensign Reedy, do you wish to make a confession of your crimes at this time?"

Max looked at the youngster. He hadn't seen or spoken to her since he'd taken the chips in the radio room. If Reedy broke and told them what Max had done, then the entire gamble was for naught.

"I have nothing to confess," Reedy said.

"Corporal Burdick," continued Petoskey, "will you describe what you found in the radio room."

"The equipment had been disassembled and the memory chips replaced with spares." He made eye contact with no one. "This happened sometime during the last shift when Lieutenant Lukinov and Ensign Reedy were on duty together."

"Sergeant Simco, please describe your actions."

"Sir, we made a complete search of Ensign Reedy's person and belongings looking for the items described by Corporal Burdick. We found nothing there, nor in any place she is known to have visited. We also searched Lieutenant Lukinov's belongings and found nothing."

"Lieutenant Nikomedes," continued Petoskey. "Would you describe what you saw in the radio room." He added the exact date and shift.

Max repeated his story about the battery short circuit. "If Lukinov removed the chips that Ensign Burdick described, and he had them on him, then they were spaced."

Petoskey nodded. "Yes, I've thought of that. Ensign Reedy, can you explain what happened to the chips containing the communications from the neutral ship?"

"No sir, I cannot."

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"Were you and Lieutenant Lukinov working together as spies for the Adareans?"

"I was not," answered Reedy. "I can't speak for the lieutenant, as I was not in his confidence."

Petoskey slammed his fist on the table. "I think you're a coward, Reedy. You're too weak to take responsibility for your actions. I'd tell you to act like a man, but you're not."

If Petoskey hoped to provoke Reedy, then his gambit failed. She sat there, placid as a lake on a still summer day.

"Can we conduct a medical interrogation?" interjected Max.

Petoskey went to tug at his beard, but his fingers clutched at emptiness. "I've discussed that already with the surgeon and Commander Gordet. Noyes is only a medtech and not qualified to conduct an interrogation that will hold up in military court. Conceivably, we could even taint the later results of a test."

Max leaned forward. "Can we use more...traditional methods?"

"I won't command it," said Petoskey, looking directly into the recorder. He waited for Max to speak again.

Max ran his tongue over the loose replacement teeth, saying nothing, and leaned back. He might get out of this, after all.

"However, if you think...," said Petoskey.

Max looked at the camera. "Without an immediate danger, we should follow standard procedures."

Petoskey accepted this disappointment and concluded the proceedings with a provisional declaration of guilt. He ordered Reedy confined to the brig until they returned to Jesusalem.

As Max limped back toward his quarters afterward he noticed that Gordet followed him.

"What can I do for you, Commander?" asked Max.

The bull-shaped second-in-command looked around nervously, then leaned in close. "There's something you should know, sir."

"What?" asked Max wearily. "That Petoskey ordered Simco to kill me, that he intended to blame it on Reedy, and then have her arrested and executed?"

Gordet jerked back. "Did you check the secret orders too?"

"What does it matter now? Simco failed, Reedy's arrested anyway,

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and we're on our way home. A bit of advice for you, Mr. Gordet." He clapped him on the shoulder. "Next time you should pick your horse before the race is over."

He walked away. When he returned to his room, he recovered the sheet with the combination from its hiding spot and destroyed it. He didn't know what the secret orders said. He didn't care.

There was only one thing he had left to do.

THIRD SHIFT, NIGHT rotation, normal schedule. Max headed down to the brig carrying a black bag. One of Simco's troopers stood guard. "I'm here to interrogate the prisoner," Max said.

"Let me check with Sergeant Simco, sir."

Max had been thinking hard about this. Only two people knew that he had the plans for the deflector, and the only way two people could keep a secret was if one of them was dead.

"Sarge wants to know if you need help," said the trooper.

"Tell him that I take full responsibility for this, in the name of the Department of Political Education, and that no assistance will be necessary."

The trooper relayed this information, then gave Max a short, sneering nod. "He says he understands. Perfectly. But he wants me to make sure that you'll be safe in there."

Max patted a hand on his black bag. "If you hear screaming," he said, "don't interrupt us unless it's mine."

The trooper twitched uncomfortably under Max's glare. "Yes, sir." He opened the door for Max.

Reedy twitched then sat up quickly on the edge of her bunk. Her wrists and ankles were cuffed, and she wore insignialess fatigues. She folded her hands on her knees, fingertip to fingertip, pressed together hard enough to turn her knuckles white.

He stepped inside. The room was barely eight feet by four, with a bed on one wall and a stainless steel toilet built into the corner opposite the door. "That'll be all, trooper," Max said. "I'll signal you when I'm done."

The hatch closed behind him and latched shut. He looked at Reedy.

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Her eyes were red and puffy but devoid of feeling, her cheeks hollow and drawn. A blue vein stood out vulnerably on her pale neck.

With his lips tight, Max gave her a small nod. He removed a wand from his bag and searched the room for bugs. She watched closely while he located and destroyed them.

"You look depressed," he said quietly when he was done.

She shook her head, once. "No, I've been depressed before. This time it's not bad."

"Define *not bad*."

"It's bad when you want to kill yourself. Right now, I just wish I was dead. That's not bad."

Max sat down with his back against the door and opened his bag. He removed two tumblers and a bottle of ouzo. The ensign remained perfectly still as Max pulled out a plate, and ripped open vacuum-wrapped packages of cheese, sausages, and anchovies to set on it.

"Not proper *mezedes* at all," he said apologetically. "The fish should always be fresh."

He filled one cup and pushed it over toward Reedy, then poured and swallowed his own. It tasted like licorice, reminding him both of his childhood and his days as a young man in completely different ways. Reedy remained immobile.

"I've been thinking." Max spoke very quietly, unbuttoning his collar. "When two men know a secret, it's only safe if one of them is dead." Good men had died already because of this. So would many more, likely enough, along with the bad. "Therefore you don't know anything. Only I, and Lukinov, and Lukinov's dead. Do you understand this?"

"I don't know anything," Reedy said, with just a hint of irony. She reached over and lifted the glass of ouzo with both hands.

"My department will declare you the most politically sound of officers. Intelligence will know the truth, at least at the level that matters. Drozhin will get the captain's official report, but he'll get another report unofficially. You'll be fine." He picked up an anchovy. "There will be a very difficult time, a very ugly courtmartial. But you can survive that."

"Again?"

"Again. This one will not be removed from the record due to extenuating circumstances." Her attack on Vance had been one of self-defense.

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"But you'll be exonerated. You'll be fine. Things are changing. They'll be better." He believed that.

She leaned her head back and tossed down the ouzo. Max reached over and poured her another glass while her eyes were still watering. "When I got this assignment," she said, "I couldn't figure out if I was being rewarded for being at the top of the class in languages, despite being a woman. Or if I was being punished for being a woman."

"Sometimes it's both ways at once," Max said. He bit the anchovy and found he didn't care for the taste.

"Can I ask you one question?" asked Reedy.

Why did people always think he had all the answers? "Information is like ouzo. A little bit can clear your head, make you feel better. Too much will make you sick, maybe even kill you." He twirled his cup. "What's your question?"

"Did you really win your wife in a card game?"

"Yes." He drained his glass to cover his surprise. Though he'd won her with a bluff and not by cheating.

"Why did she leave you?"

Max thought about telling her that was two questions. Then he thought about telling her the truth, that his wife hadn't left him, that she waited at home for him, not knowing where he was or what he did, going to church every day, caring for their two grandchildren. His daughter was about Reedy's age. But he'd kept his life sealed in separate compartments and wouldn't breech one of them now.

"Love, like loyalty," he said, "is a gift. You can only try to be worthy of it."

The silence lengthened out between them like all of the empty, uncharted universe. The food sat untouched while they drank. Max could feel himself getting drunk. It felt good.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

DARK, DARKER, DARKO

THE WAY I SEE it, an unheralded film named *Donnie Darko* is hands-down the best science fiction movie in quite a few years.

Granted, this verges on damning with faint praise, but actually it's quite a good picture and deserves a much wider audience than it has received.

Darko was not blessed with a massive budget and features neither spaceships nor ethnically stereotyped aliens nor a comic-book plot nor actors in ape makeup, as have the recent top grossers in the genre; but it does possess qualities its rivals lack, i.e., a good script, a complicated and compelling story, and excellent acting. Admittedly, these qualities do not normally translate into box office clout, and the genre's focus being what it is, the Best Film Hugo will probably go to another fan-friendly TV show. But my personal awards, which I believe are no more meaningless than those others, go to Richard Kelly, *Darko*'s first-time director and script writer.

Like the word "irony," which is habitually and wrongly used to characterize mere coincidence, the nature and meaning of the term "black comedy" is often misapprehended. Thus it is that *American Beauty*, perhaps the most self-congratulatory film in the history of the motion picture, a pompous art-statement made by folks who wouldn't recognize art if it stuck its tongue down their throat, has been labeled a black comedy, whereas it is in actuality a tired and pretentious social satire that launches a labored attack on the wages of consumerism (a blatant hypocrisy, considering its origin at DreamWorks) and concludes with a voiceover narrated by a dead

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man telling us how he wouldn't change a thing about his life, which included alienation from his wife, the contempt of his children, a joyless job, a self-destructive infatuation with a cheerleader, and his subsequent murder at the hands of a deranged. homophobe/homosexual. The imperatives of black comedy demand a less deluded resolution and permit no such sappy epiphanies. By any definition, however, *Donnie Darko* is a black comedy, albeit a most unconventional one that juxtaposes concerns with mental problems, troubled teenagers, families, the '80s, time travel, and the institutions of self-help, high school, and psychiatry, and somehow manages to juggle all this material and achieve an allusive beauty. And unlike most black comedies, *Darko* is hilariously funny.

The title character, played by Jake Gyllenhaal (Homer Hickam in *October Sky*), is a bright suburban teenager currently on medication and undergoing therapy for undefined psychological problems that manifest in sleepwalking and the occasional act of arson. He also receives visits from an imaginary (or perhaps not so imaginary) friend named Frank who wears the dirt-smeared costume of a heavy metal Easter Bunny with pupil-less eyes, ferocious teeth, and antlerlike ears. One night after being summoned from his dreams by Frank, Donnie sleepwalks, and Frank tells him that he has traveled back from the future to warn him that the world will end in slightly more than twenty-eight days. After sleeping until morning on a golf course, Donnie returns home to find that a jet engine has fallen out of the sky (yet no plane reports one missing) and crashed into his bedroom — Frank has, in effect, saved his life. From this point on, Frank returns every so often to remind Donnie that time is running out and instructs him to commit a number of increasingly violent crimes that appear to be unrelated, but eventually are seen to be elements of a larger and more mysterious event. Donnie soon begins to observe strange distortions in reality. For one, he sees transparent liquid entities that emerge from the chests of his friends and family and precede them as they move through their days, almost as if these creatures were leading their human hosts along predestined paths. How Donnie interprets these phenomena and learns what he must do in order to spare the people he loves (a new girlfriend, parents, et al.) from

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mortal danger and a more punishing variety of grief than they otherwise might suffer forms the basis of the plot.

Of the smallish tradition of American black comedies that have utilized a high school setting — *Heathers, Rushmore, Election, The Faculty* (I insist it's a comedy), none has done so more effectively than *Darko*. Donnie's school, Middlesex, is lorded over by a grotesque bronze mascot, half-man, half-bulldog, known as the Mongrel, and this bizarre piece of statuary informs the character of the school, a place where self-help guru Jim Cunningham (a perfectly cast Patrick Swayze) is revered by half the faculty, reviled by the other half, and whose student body has the paranoid cohesion of patients on a mental ward. Donnie constantly gets himself in trouble by challenging the school's short-sighted authority figures, but finds a sympathetic ear in the person of an English teacher played nicely by Drew Barrymore, who also served as the film's executive producer (God bless you, Ms. Barrymore! I take back every nasty thing I ever said about you...except for the stuff about *Charlie's Angels*) and a physics teacher who nourishes Donnie's interest in time travel by giving him a book on the subject written by a former Middlesex faculty member — she has since devolved into a creepy old neighborhood lady known by the kids as Grandma Death.

The most astonishing thing about *Darko* is its level of ambition and the degree to which it succeeds in doing what it seeks to accomplish. Not only is it a black comedy, it is also an effective period piece — the story unfolds against the backdrop of the Bush-Dukakis election — and a poignant family drama. Generally films that attempt this much, especially first films, wind up being complete messes; the problem of creating characters that are at the same time real and funny usually proves too much to overcome. But while some of Darko's characters are wrought with broad strokes, the accuracy of Kelly's dialog inspirits other of his creations to stand and breathe with authentic power. I've seen the movie twice now, and I'm still not quite certain how Kelly manages to pull his complex materials together. But pull them together he does, and in a manner that is both startling and intensely moving. Gyllenhaal, by turns menacing, vulnerable, and funny, brilliantly assists his director in conveying the emotional

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substance of the film, and the remainder of the cast — notably Katharine Ross as Donnie's psychiatrist, and Mary McDonnell and Holmes Osborne as his well-intended but bewildered parents — complements his performance. If *Darko* had been better distributed and given a sufficient advertising budget, I'm convinced that Gyllenhaal would have had a chance for an Oscar nomination.

Those who have read this column may have concluded that I have no affection for the tropes of traditional science fiction, but this is not the case. I would love to see a science fictional *Lawrence of Arabia*, an epic space opera replete with explosions and aliens and so forth, and that also is gifted with vital characters and a story that aspires to do more than update a fairy tale or repackage a western. But given the state of the industry, I'm not so sure such a film is possible. Having endured almost every genre movie released this year, from the putrescence that was *Mission to Mars*, through the faux-Kubrickian puffery of *AI* to *Planet of the Apes*, a laughably incompetent film that Tim Burton appears to have assembled from spare parts fallen out of Charleton Heston's brain, it's become apparent that there is a formula at work here: the bigger the budget, the dumber the movie. Perhaps this process has some economic validity, though the box-office performance of such films as I have mentioned — one-week-wonders all — seems to imply that there is plenty of room for refinement. Give a director eight or nine figures to play with, and you are flat guaranteed a mediocre-at-best product with a great look and way-cool FX and the intellectual content of a Saturday morning cartoon. Much of this is due to the fact that studio heads, paranoid about their massive investments, cannot stop tinkering and assign writer after writer to perform serial hack jobs on what once may have been decent scripts, the idea being that this employment of multiple incompetents will transform the script into something accessible to the lowest common denominator, thus making it appeal to a wider audience. Indie films, once the refuge of the *auteur*, have become little more than a farm system for Hollywood. Films by new directors such as Kelly are esssentially job applications. The odds are good that *Darko* will not be merely Kelly's first film, but his only good film, and like his immediate predecessors Darren Aronofsky *(Requiem for a Dream)*,

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now assigned to *Batman Beyond*, and Chris Nolan *(Memento)*, currently filming a remake of the Danish film *Insomnia* starring the gag-and-shudder pairing of mugger Robin Williams and shouter Al Pacino, and like dozens of others before them, he will be gobbled up by the studios and assigned to a project that pays him a seven-figure director's fee and has no chance whatsoever of being worth mule spit.

Is there a remedy for this?

In a better world, where punishment and reward were fairly apportioned out by Hollywood, a director like Martin Scorsese, say, would be called into the office after producing several losers in a row and told, "Marty, we're sending you down to the minors. Let's see what you can do with a five million dollar budget. Reacquaint yourself with story values, and then maybe we'll bring you back up."

Or let's suppose that Hollywood was run like the NBA, with a rookie salary cap. Every new director brought into the system, instead of one moment being in charge of a film he made on credit cards, faith, and cheap take-out, and the next moment driving down the highway in a 100 million dollar star vehicle, so intimidated by the experience that he permits himself to be dictated to by Armani-clad bozos whose idea of a good time is sitting around a table talking concept with twelve guys named "Hey, you!" — instead of that, if they were moved along slowly, given a few smallish vehicles to prove their worth before handing them the keys to the stretch limo, if Hollywood were run like any ordinary business, then we might actually get to see a big-budget science fiction movie that's aimed at an audience who have stopped measuring their rate of growth with marks on a doorframe.

But that day will likely never come.

Hollywood, stoned on the fumes of ego and power, perceives a different reality than most of us and operates with a lurid dysfunctionality that, though horribly inefficient, manages to survive in a celebrity-driven environment. Should that environment change, however, a thousand blackly clad lizards will scurry from the studio lots, squeaking that the sky is falling, seeking to avoid being crushed by the fall of the fabulous edifice that protected them from the killing light of truth and beauty, and the laws of Karma.

Now there is a dumb big-budget movie I'd like to see:

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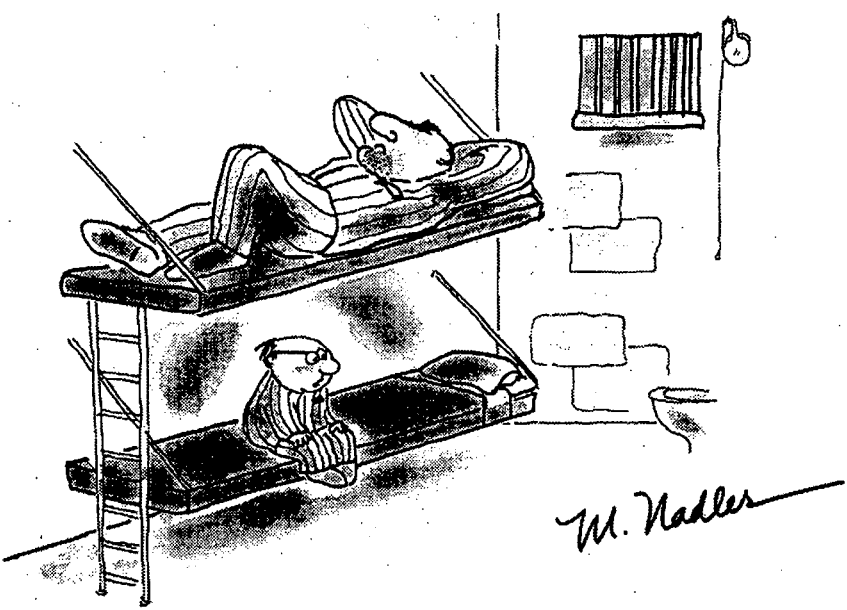
The Sky Is Falling.

A disaster flick starring every lame-o actor whose career expired in this industry Extinction-Level Event.

For now, those who yearn for adult science fiction films are stuck with little pictures like *Donnie Darko* and Aronofsky's *Pi*. It's not such a bad place to be stuck, really. There's a considerable joy to be had in discovering such films, in wandering into a theater and watching something completely unexpected on the screen, something that hasn't been denatured, castrated, and covered in a thin candy shell.

At any rate, it'll have to do until something better happens along.



"I emitted a series of surprisingly loud and barklike coughs during a poignant passage in Bach's 'Concerto in D Minor' at the Phil. You!"

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Michael Thomas lives in the Detroit environs. Over the past few years, he has contributed several works of near-future science fiction, such as "Sometimes a Helix Is a Circle," "The Time Thief," and "Queen of Thieves." His latest tale is a bit of a departure: an historical piece that brings us back to the early days of that technological innovation known as the gun.

Mr. Thomas reports that most of his time nowadays is taken up with editing an engineering magazine for power plants and utilities, as well as doubling as editor for a trade magazine for machine shops.

The Beast of Downy Mount

By Michael Thomas

ON THE DAY HENRY MCVANE bought his flintlock, most of us in New Hope either shrugged our shoulders or laughed out loud. He actually paid cash money for the thing. Henry went to Springfield with $10 in his pocket to buy a new colter for his plow and came back with a musket. His wife, Emma, nearly took a meat cleaver to him.

"Ten dollars!" she wailed to anyone who would listen at Sunday services. "We can't even buy feed for the chickens and he spends ten dollars on a gun!"

But then Henry always was an odd sort of fellow. Real nice, but odd. Like the time a coyote raided his chickens. The next night, Henry hid in the coup and spent all night howling, the idea being to lure the coyote back and then bash it with a hammer. That coyote is probably still laughing its head off.

After services, some of us gathered around and asked Henry why he spent money on something as useless as a gun. With his hay-colored hair and habit of balancing himself on the sides of his boots, he looked like a kid caught stealing his father's tobacco.

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He just shrugged his bony shoulders and said, "You never know when Indians might attack the town."

We all looked at each other. "What Indians?" Charles Wooster asked.

Henry shrugged his shoulders again. A week later he took Charles and Daniel Fry and me up to Glory Falls to demonstrate the usefulness of his flintlock. He took his time explaining how he measured out the precise amount of powder and poured it into the priming pan and he held up the ball between his fingers as if he were holding up a jewel to the light. Then he dropped it down the barrel and rammed it home and we started stalking.

Soon enough, a doe wandered between two beech trees. We stopped dead in our tracks. Henry lifted the musket and sighted down the barrel. Now my father told me that when he volunteered for the militia at Concord, there weren't enough muskets to go around, not that it mattered. The officers told them not to aim since that just wastes time and you never hit what you aim at anyway. Just shoot and charge. But try telling that to Henry. He took his time aiming, then slowly pulled the trigger. The gun went off like a thunder clap and so many sparks flew from the flint that one burned Dan Fry's cheek. The ball whizzed over the doe's startled head to knock some leaves from their branches and the doe fled for its life. So did every bird, squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, and gray fox within miles. By the time Henry managed to reload, we were the only living things in the woods.

After that, Henry put his musket in his tool shed and pretty much forgot about it until the creature came to New Hope.

Living in the shadow of Downy Mount, we naturally collected our share of tall tales the way trees gather moss. There was the Hellfire troll that came out of its cave at the full moon and hunted down folks who stayed away from church. Then there was the Algonquian burial ground where ghosts did a war dance and went out seeking scalps. The most feared creature was Dorinda the witch, feared because she actually lived in a shack above Glory Falls and sold herb remedies and cast spells for folks. Dorinda wasn't a witch, just a crazy whore. Even as a child, Dorinda was strange, talking to herself in some made-up language, disappearing at night into the woods, making sparrows land on her arms by singing to

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them. The real trouble started when her time came and her breasts started to swell and she'd walk along the plank streets of New Hope and grin at all the men and rub her hands all over her chest. That's the real reason she was run out of town when she was fourteen. Still, all the women who despised her weren't above sneaking up to her place to get a charm to help them get a child or buy a hex on some enemy. And while none of us ever said it out loud, we knew some of the men went up there at nights to trade corn meal or a bolt of cloth for a taste of her body. There were hot nights when I'd gaze at Downy Mount and find myself thinking of Dorinda and wonder how different she might be from my Rachel. I resisted, but the temptation returned now and again like a bad dream.

So we had our stories about demons and monsters to make long nights seem shorter. The creature I'm talking about came during the drought of '05. Spring came early, the sky dried out, the heat settled over Massachusetts like a plague. Our soy beans and corn never stood a chance. Many of us lived on chickens and pigs and anything we could buy in Springfield, which wasn't much. Nothing makes a man feel as lonely and powerless as the weather. I remember standing at the edge of my bean field and staring at the dry and cracked ground, the yellowing stalks, and feeling as if I was shrinking until my manhood was as useless and shriveled as the bean stalks. The sky was the color of pale ice only it wasn't cold; it was hot enough to make me think I had a fever all summer long. Three pigs out of my seven died so lean we couldn't even butcher them. And there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. My Rachel and the children were scared. I felt like a failure and as much as I hate to admit it now, I found myself wishing they were already dead just so I could stop feeling like I failed them. Just one night of peace. That's all. Then I burned with shame and tried to force the thoughts from my soul.

I went into the house and balanced Colin and Samuel on my knees, hugging them all the while. Rebecca toddled up with her puppet. I kissed her cheek, then showed the children how to make cat's cradles. After I put them to bed, I took my Rachel by the shoulders and turned her around. She stood at the table, collecting potato skins for the pigs. She smelled of earth and harsh soap. Her pale eyes searched mine.

"It's bound to rain sooner or later," I said.

She nodded, but bit her lip. "We always get by," she said.

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"Yes, we do," I said and pressed my lips to hers, then hugged her so suddenly she gasped. "I love you," I said to drive away my fears.

She nodded into my chest, then pulled away to resume her work on the potato skins.

"Come to bed," I said.

Rachel shook her head. "I can't, Lucas," she said. "It's my time." I thought I heard a note of relief in her voice. I turned away before a sudden surge of anger made me say something I'd regret.

In the morning, Dan Fry's boys rode through the farms and summoned us to the church. Something evil happened, they said. We got troubles.

Many of us heeded the call along with a gathering of town folk. Dan Fry stood before the lectern, his face the color of a mushroom, and told his story.

"I heard a pig squealing last night," he said. "So I went out thinking coyotes were raiding the farm. Then I saw it. At first I thought it was some child because it was kinda small and hunched over. I took after it, but it looked up and so help me Lord Jesus it was the worst demon face you can think of. It looked like something already dead and buried and it had fangs and horrible eyes. And blood was all over it because it was eating a pig. Live! Didn't even kill the thing before it started eating the insides. You got to believe me. When it saw me it stood up and it was taller than me. I wouldn't be standing here telling you this if it hadn't got scared and run off."

If it had been anyone else, we might have laughed. But Dan Fry was a strapping, level-headed sort. He had no more imagination than the mountains had fancy cities. I wondered if he had been making corn liquor or maybe the heat finally got to him. I looked back into his eyes and I saw terror in them.

I sat next to Henry McVane and afterward I asked him what he thought. Henry considered the story, then shrugged. "This drought's so bad, maybe something got stirred up and came down looking for food."

"So you believe him?" I asked.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Thing is, there's lots of hidey holes and caves and things up there. How do we know what lives up there and stays clear of us most of the time? What do you think, Lucas?"

I climbed into my wagon and gazed at Downy Mount. Haze coated the

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slopes and the sun was like a smear on a window pane. Maybe it was the heat, but my mind wandered to crazy Dorinda in her shack by the cool waters of the river and what it might be like to feel her thighs around my waist, to just take a woman and never worry whether she had enough to eat. I shook the thoughts away and said, "I don't know, Henry. Just in case, you ought to clean the rust off your musket."

Henry cocked his head and considered the idea.

"But if you see it, don't bother to aim," I laughed.

Henry smiled ruefully and walked away.

The next night, the thing returned and got Sam Lerner's chickens. The night after that, Sarah Ernest had a conniption fit when she saw it staring through her window. Saturday night, riders summoned us again to the church. This time Charles Wooster stood before us, his gaunt body still as rock, his jaw quivering from the strain of holding back tears. His voice shattered as he said, "My Robert is gone."

The church fell as quiet as a tomb.

Pastor Stevens said, "He's out playing."

"Fishing," someone said.

"No need to fuss."

Charles leveled his gaze at us, ready to go for someone's throat. "It took him. I know it took him. I saw its tracks. Help me. Please!"

The tomb sealed itself. Charles and Anne had only the one child and it wasn't even his own. They never talked much about it, but everyone said Anne was barren. Then one day Charles goes off and comes back with his brother's baby because his brother died of the flu. Even though Robert wasn't his real son, Charles and Anne cared for him and loved him like the best parents in the world and raised him to be as fine a boy as any in New Hope. You can't hear about someone losing their only child without a pit opening up in your stomach big enough to swallow your heart.

At last I ventured, "Charles, we don't know there's any monster running around here."

Charles glared at me. I stared at my boots and wished I had the sense to keep my mouth shut.

"Please!" Charles wailed.

So there we all sat in the dim windowless church, no one speaking, all thinking the same thing. We were scared of the creature just like we were

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scared of the drought. We were powerless to make it rain. We were powerless to help Charles. No, not powerless. Cowards.

Then the voice of God saved us by speaking through Pastor Stevens. "Doesn't that Henry McVane have a musket?"

Yes, of course. Henry! Make Henry do it! As if we were all the separate heads of one giant monster, we turned and looked at Henry McVane in the last row. Henry turned the color of whitewash.

"You got to kill it, Henry," an old man said.

"Charles's boy!" Sarah Ernest cried. "We got to save him!"

Charles stared as if Henry was already up on the wall nailed to the cross.

At that moment, my face burned red and the heat built under my shirt and I felt as if I would throw up. My shame took hold of me like someone possessed by the devil. How could I ever take hold of my Rachel and make love to her again, knowing I wasn't a man at all, but a coward, and hearing that relief in her voice that meant she also knew I was a coward? How could I look my own boys in the face? I felt like my soul left my body and hovered in the rafters and watched someone else speak. "I'll go with you, Henry," my body said.

Henry nodded at me and swallowed. Fingers took mine, Rachel's touch bringing me back to my body. She looked into my eyes, saw something there, nodded. "I love you," she said. Her voice broke.

"I love you," I said and gripped her hand.

"Bring their boy back safe, Lucas," she said. I wondered if she wanted me to go, to not come back, to be rid of me. But that was foolish.

Pastor Stevens began a prayer of deliverance.

WHICH IS HOW HENRY and Charles and I returned to Glory Falls with Henry's musket and knives and Sam Lerner's dog Cornwall. The skinny yellow mutt caught a scent at Charles's farm, took off quartering the fields, then headed through the oaks to the ridge. We climbed after Cornwall and soon ascended Downy Mount. Charles and Henry and I stayed silent and grim. Even a field of blooming mountain laurels couldn't cheer us. Farther up, the rhododendrons, usually taller than a man and blooming and dripping moisture, looked stunted and dry,

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leaves yellowing and curling in on themselves. It was as if God had cursed the land.

At Glory Falls, Cornwall lost the scent in the river. Again I'm ashamed to admit it, but I felt my heart leap when Cornwall lost the scent and stared pathetically at us. We tried. We could go home now and hold our heads up.

Charles clenched his fists and glared at the pine and beech-coated mountains. Henry fingered his flintlock and held it across his chest like a shield. Haze from the heat hung across the mountains; even this high up the infernal heat killed all sound, all movement of paws and wings. If a geyser of flames had spewed from the river, announcing the entryway to Hell, I would not have been surprised.

Again my face burned. Even though my legs shook and I had to fight with my own body to stop myself from pissing in my pants, I said, "If it came this way, only one place it might head." I pointed beyond the falls to the peak of Downy Mount. "There's a cave up there. Saw it once."

Charles whirled on me, bit his lip and gave a curt nod. "We'll try it."

He tied a rope leash to Cornwall and we climbed the slick rocks next to the falls. At the top, I took the dog and the lead, guiding the way to my own funeral.

We all knew we'd never make it back down before nightfall. We kept our fear to ourselves, put one foot in front of another and climbed into the suffocating haze.

A new thought stopped me in my tracks. "Dorinda," I said.

Charles and Henry stared at me as if I had started talking in tongues.

"Dorinda," I said. "Her shack's near here."

"So what?" Charles said. "She's crazy."

"Yeah, but she lives up here. She might have seen something."

"I'm not wasting daylight going anywhere near that whore. Should have been put out of her misery long ago."

"But if it came this way...."

"I said no!" Charles screamed. Henry and I took a step backward and Cornwall tucked his tail between his legs.

None of us wanted to confront Dorinda, even be close enough to smell her unwashed flesh, but Charles's rage went beyond fear. Then he sighed and slumped his shoulders and he said, "All right. We'll go."

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We set off to the east through the pines until we came again to the northern banks of the river. Across the river, pines and birch trees towered over Dorinda's pathetic shack. If you didn't know to look for it, you might think the shack was just a pile of dead logs. We walked upstream until we could ford the river, then walked back to the shack.

Fungus grew on the logs. An old sheet billowed in the window. Underbrush advanced on the cabin like an invading army and weeds grew from the thatched roof. A field of bloodroot swarmed around the logs; that was the odd part. The white flower of bloodroot only blooms in the spring. Where even the rhododendrons wilted and died, the bloodroot flowers flourished in the hot summer.

We called Dorinda's name. Silence. Called again. Not even the wind stirred in answer.

"Let me handle her," Charles said and marched to the door and pounded on it. He put his shoulder to the planks and shoved. Charles stood in the doorway with his back to us, as still as a grave marker. Then he said, "My sweet Lord Jesus."

Cornwall refused to move, hunkered down with his face in his paws. Henry and I walked to the door and peered around Charles's shoulders. For a moment, I could see nothing in the gloom. When my eyes adjusted, I wished I had never looked. First I saw Dorinda, or what was left of her. She looked like a corn husk tossed away after someone ate the insides. Flies and maggots crawled across her sickly gray face. I looked away and saw the rest. Dead chickens littered the floor and dried blood stained the dirt floor around a big cast iron pot. All over the walls, Dorinda, or someone, had painted weird drawings, things that looked like hex signs. The symbols had been painted in blood. I smelled the foul stench of rotting meat.

We three turned away and stumbled into the fresh air. For long minutes we said nothing. At last Henry whispered, "It got her too."

Charles said, "That stuff. Looked like some witch thing. Like casting a spell."

"Maybe Dorinda conjured the thing," I said. "Maybe it was too much and it took her." I touched Charles's shoulder. "You know I got to go back in there."

Charles nodded and stared at the dirt. I turned and stepped over the

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brush until I reached the door. I made sure I didn't look left where Dorinda's body lay, but went instead to the cauldron. Whatever she had cooked up now only caked the bottom like a dried swamp with the trees of chicken bones poking through the muck. I hunted, touched what I dared, but found no sign of Robert Wooster's body. Only chickens and Dorinda had been slaughtered. I was about to leave when I caught sight of a puppet leaning in a corner. For a moment, I no longer stood in Dorinda's shack, but walked the plank streets of New Hope and saw a child dancing toward me, that same puppet clasped to her chest. She stopped and held up the puppet and sang, "Want to play at puppets with me?" Her voice was the sound of wind chimes and I wanted desperately to say yes, but my mother told me Dorinda was evil and so I shook my head, but as she skipped away I followed her to a glade behind the market and watched her dance and spin and sing in a cloud of butterflies and lacewings. My heart opened at the sight of Dorinda dancing, a strange nameless yearning that sent the blood pulsing at my temples and a feverish wave rushing through my brain. She was the most beautiful person I had ever seen, and her dance was a free-spirited and loose-limbed dance of freedom. Years later I again passed Dorinda in the streets, only this time I was becoming a man and her insolent grin and the thrust of her breasts against her dress sent my blood rushing to my loins. I turned before she saw me and fled. Pastor Stevens said thinking bad things is the same as doing bad things. If that was true then I was damned, or at least I thought so back then. All these years later, that same childhood puppet watched me from button eyes and I felt not damned, but remorseful. We had all done evil to Dorinda. I wished I could go back and do it all over again. I crossed myself and muttered the Lord's Prayer for her and left, keeping my back to what remained of Dorinda.

"It was chicken blood," I told Charles. "Or her blood. No sign of Robert."

Charles set his jaw and said, "Let's go."

We hurried away from Dorinda's shack and the nightmare vision, chased by the demons of our own fears.

Dusk coated the mountain like fog by the time we reached the summit. I led them around an outcropping and we reached the cave, actually little more than a fissure in the granite wall. Charles peered inside, but could see nothing. Since none of us wanted to chance the

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mountain in the dark, we were pretty much stuck there for the night. We built a fire at the cave entrance and between the fire and a torch we could see most of the cave. It was just rock walls and dirt.

I had been so sure.

"There!" Henry yelped.

He held the torch close to the wall; lines ran down the side, scratched into the rock. At first I couldn't figure out what they were, then it hit me. Something had scratched the wall with claws from roof to floor, large sharp talons, nothing a bear or anything else could have made.

"It's been here," Henry said.

"So it'll come back," Charles said.

"It's like it left us a sign," I whispered.

We retreated to the warmth and the light of the fire.

For much of that night, Charles paced the circle of light like a guard protecting the walls of a fort. Henry busied himself cleaning his flintlock, blowing dirt out of the priming pan and filling it with powder.

"Think we'll find Robert?" he asked when Charles was out of earshot.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You think, if Dorinda conjured this demon, a gun could hurt it?" Henry asked.

I wished he hadn't brought that up. "Don't think we'll sleep much tonight," I said.

"You know, we got our backs to a wall," Henry said. "If something comes at us, we got nowhere to run."

"Henry," I said. "You want to stop thinking so much. It'll get you in trouble."

"I'm just saying."

"How about saying something else?" I said.

Henry pouted and cradled his musket.

Of course, once he opened his mouth, I couldn't help staring into the darkness beyond the fire and waiting for some shape to come up the rise and eat us alive. The moon filtered through the leaves, turning the woods into a quilt of silver and black.

It was like standing at the edge of my fields and watching the soybeans die, listening to the pigs whine in pain and hunger, dreading the look in my Rachel's eyes.

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"I don't want to die," Henry said.

"Stop it," I said.

"I don't want to die with sin on my soul," he whispered.

"I'm not Pastor Stevens," I said.

"I saw her once," he said. "Dorinda. She was out in a field of laurel and she was dancing. I came up on her and there she was twirling around and singing to herself, just so innocent like, happy and all. I just watched her like it was a dream. Then she spotted me and she smiled and she lay down in the laurel and hiked up her skirts and waited for me."

He shut up and I could only nod my head and say, "It's natural, Henry."

"I sinned," Henry said. "Lord Jesus forgive me."

"He forgives you," I said even though I wasn't convinced. If Henry sinned, he had plenty of company. If death lurked on that mountain, all three of us would die unsaved. But was that true? I couldn't think that way no matter what people said. I was just scared of dying because afterward there might be nothing.

"You get some sleep," I said. "I'll stand guard."

Despite my determination to stand guard, I dozed and fell into dreams of pigs eaten alive. Henry fell asleep, leaning on his musket. We both jerked awake to stare into each other's terrified eyes. Cornwall barked furiously and down the bluff, Charles screamed again.

I reached him first, stumbling to a halt and throwing out my arm to stop Henry's mad charge. Henry made a sound like a stuck pig. I probably did the same.

The thing loomed in a patch of moonlight and held Charles tight to its chest with one arm while it stroked his head with long dirty talons like a loving eagle from hell. Its face was a skull imperfectly worked from clay; one moment it was a skull, the next the hint of a skull protruding from gray and mottled flesh. It heard us and looked up, then grinned, exposing teeth as jagged as a saw blade. More than anything, that grin seized me to the bowels and made me want to run screaming home. It was a demon grin, the mad humorless expression of a creature ready to drag us to damnation.

But I saw something else in that face, a hint, a memory, a shadow more awful than the face itself.

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"You leave him be, Dorinda," I said.

The creature stopped petting Charles and its grin went wider. "It's clever, isn't it? Yes it is so clever."

Cornwall leaped and fretted and barked at the creature, the fur on its hackles rising above his spine. "Come here doggy," the demon said. "I need my dinner."

"You shape-changed, didn't you?" I said. "You left your old body like a snake shedding its skin."

Dorinda cackled. "Yes, yes, so clever. Come to me and let me stroke your black hair."

Cornwall charged. As if stomping on an ant, the creature lashed out with a taloned foot. Cornwall leaped away and backpedaled, snarling all the time.

Charles was as pale as marble, could do nothing but stand still in Dorinda's savage embrace. Henry eased next to me, flintlock raised, his hands shaking and turning the barrel into a pinwheel in the night. He yearned to blow a hole clean through the monster. Thank God he remembered the doe, thought twice unless he accidentally put the ball through Charles's face.

Dorinda looked down at Charles and resumed stroking his head. "You come to me at last, didn't you?" she purred. "I knew you would. I treated you right, didn't I? I gave you what you wanted, didn't I? Why was you so mean to your Dorinda? Why?"

"Dorinda," I said. "You let Charles go and give us back his boy."

She leered at me and stuck out a liver-colored tongue. "His boy is it? I took back my own. He's mine, all mine. And now I've got the daddy, my love, my heart's desire."

Charles stared wild-eyed at us as the talons stroked his face, a long sharp nail playing with his eye.

"Dorinda, you stop talking nonsense and let him go," I said. To Henry I whispered, "Get ready. First chance you get, you send it back to hell."

"No, no, no, my clever one. He came to me, he did, just like you all do sooner or later. The pretty ones that beg for my help then spit on me in the streets. Oh yes, he came for a cure to fix his barren woman. And I says what price will you pay. And he says anything. So I let him take me and I gave him a son, bore it myself and screamed at the moon when the

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pains was too bad to bear and he said he would take me away and be my man, but instead he took the baby away and threw money in my face and told me he'd kill poor Dorinda if I said a word. Now was that a way to treat the woman who loves you beyond all earthly things?"

Charles looked at me, so desperate to deny her story I knew she must be telling the truth.

"Well, that's real sad," I said. "You were treated bad. But it's all over now, Dorinda. Give him back to us. Give us his boy."

The talons gripped Charles's face as if it were an apple. He cried out and Dorinda crooned, "Hush, hush, my love. Dorinda would never hurt her love." Without looking away from Charles, Dorinda whispered, "He weren't the only one, you know. Lots of men came to Dorinda. Lots of women. They all wanted something. Men wanted a good harvest. Women wanted the man of their hearts, or to bear children. Men mostly just wanted Dorinda when their women wasn't enough to satisfy them. And then they spit on me and called me whore. Well, that's all over now, isn't it, my love?"

As if Charles were as light as a baby, Dorinda lifted him off his feet by his head. Charles screamed, his feet thrashing above the ground. I stood paralyzed with fear and helplessness.

"Stop it!" I screamed. "Stop it!"

Cornwall leaped and snarled.

Then there was another scream, only this one came from Henry. Like a mad cavalryman, he charged past me, holding his musket as if to impale Dorinda on an imaginary bayonet. He almost reached her. Dorinda's free hand swung in an arc, caught Henry on the side of the head and sent him flying.

But not before he pulled the trigger. Sparks swirled like demented fireflies in the dark, thunder ricocheted off the mountains and smoke curled through the moonlight. Dorinda stared down at her chest in surprise. She dropped Charles and stepped backward, her hands clutching the wound ripped into her chest by a musket fired so close. She looked at me like a confused child. Cornwall attacked, raking her leg with his fangs. She stumbled away from the dog, then fell, rolling head over heels down the bluff until her body crashed into a massive oak and lay still.

I could move again. I rushed first to Charles, who was breathing but

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out cold. Then to Henry. Dorinda's talons had raked deep scratches into his face, but he was alive. His eyes opened, he stared blankly at me, then shook sense into his brain.

"It's over," I said. "She's dead."

Henry nodded. He crawled to his hands and knees and vomited bile.

We never did find Charles's boy. We searched, but found nothing. Afterward, we went back and burned Dorinda's body, then burned her shack. There's still a charred patch in the woods where the shack had been. Nothing grows there.

Charles never recovered from that night. Dorinda's vengeance turned him into a sad and empty husk. Sometimes he stands in his fields staring into the mountains and waiting for her to return. Naturally, none of us said anything about what Charles did to Dorinda. There was no point.

The people of New Hope look differently at Henry now. He wears the scars on his face like a badge and walks with a strut. Years later, we asked Henry to be our part-time constable. He said yes, of course, and likes to entertain children with the story of his adventure on Downy Mount while he shows them the very same musket that killed the beast. He's the closest thing to a hero New Hope ever had.

And I sleep only in fits and starts, waking at three in the morning to prowl the house and make sure my Rachel and my children are safe. Then I go to the mantel and I take down my musket and work away the rust and clean it and smell the powder and hold it like a sign against evil.

Now, all the men in New Hope own guns.

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Alison Bowman was inspired to try her hand at writing science fiction by "the colorful issues of F&SF *that permeate my apartment"—thank you, o roommate, for leading her our way. Ms. Bowman lives in Oakland and has contributed humor pieces to* The San Francisco Bay Guardian *as well as to the PBS television special "Livelyhood" hosted by Will Durst. Her* F&SF *debut shows a sharp wit and a frighteningly keen understanding of the ways of the world.*

The Copywriter

By Alison Bowman

SO ONE DAY THESE ALIENS leave a message on my machine. They say, "This is the Intergalactic Space Alien Federation. We are taking over your planet with a constellation of war satellites and plan to enslave your species. We were wondering if you might write our brochure."

The voice was bogus robo-talk and I figured it was a friend of mine joking around. But then came a knock at the door. It was the aliens ready to talk business. They didn't care about my schedule, offering only general remarks about making it "worth my during." I think they meant "while."

I couldn't very well keep them standing in the hallway. They looked like six-foot slugs and smelled of cheap incense and burnt coffee. What would the neighbors think? I let them in and they sort of slipped and sloshed their way into my sharp little home office. As soon as they were settled, they brought up the idea of doing a brochure again. Right off I said: "No damn way."

"Not in a million years could a brochure even *begin* to accomplish your objectives. That kind of worldwide endeavor clearly requires billboards,

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TV spots, direct mailers, print ads, in addition to *several* brochures. Not to mention a Web site," I told them.

They were eating it up. Literally. I had to stop them before they devoured the last of my mock-up samples. I sensed that budget wasn't an issue.

"You certainly came to the right person," I said confidently. "Now, I think you will need to lose the 'planetary takeover' language. In today's market, that's not going to fly. People want cooperation, not colonization.

"Think in terms of service," I urged them. "Global conquest aside, what do you have to offer consumers?"

The question seemed to perplex them, although it's hard to be sure. Each of their ten thousand eyes darted back and forth and a putrid new odor filled the room. Clearly, these were not the decision makers of the species. Christ, I hate middle management.

They said they would have to get back to me on my ideas about an international advertising blitzkrieg.

After they left and I was mopping up their goo, I couldn't stop shaking my head. In all my years, I had never seen a more naive group of clientele. What in the world, I wondered aloud, did they think a single brochure could possibly accomplish? Here they are, a vast conglomerate of the universe's higher intelligence, and they believed throwing a couple thousand into a glossy throwaway document would serve them Planet Earth on a saucer. It really makes you wonder about the state of marketing in other galaxies.

They were total boneheads, but I resigned myself to holding their anterior tentacles through the process — not literally, I hoped. My association with their organization could lead to innumerable other accounts for me, and I've certainly had worse projects. Even if the whole colonization plan failed, I figured the worst thing that would happen to me is I go back to writing direct-mail campaigns about saving the endangered fruit fly or something. Hey, it's a living.

Soon I was asked to come visit their "ship," at 101 Market, downtown. It looked like any other glass and marble monument to the almighty dollar, although I would swear none of it had been there the week before. The lower floors were populated with what appeared by all signs to be human beings.

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"Renters," I was told when I inquired. "In this real estate market, who could resist?"

The top floors were restricted access, and that's where the aliens were making themselves at home. They had an unconventional style of housekeeping, to put it mildly. Let's just say I wasn't going to be wearing those pumps ever again.

"We've thought about your branding ideas, and we are intrigued by the prospects," the new VP of marketing explained from the other end of the trash-covered conference table. "Also, we are making a killing at the stock market, so our plan to throw your world into chaos is, for the moment, on the back reactor."

"We are having some trouble with the service question," a high-ranking manager added. "We cannot seem to uncover what it is we can offer your consumer."

I explained that's not really my specialty. "But just off the top of my head, I would say focus on your unique potential. Like, for example, do you guys do any cool tricks?"

"Cool tricks?" They got really hung up on that one. Imagine a boardroom with everyone throwing each other looks and multiply it by forty thousand eyes. I couldn't get a read at all.

"Yeah, like can you cook an egg by just looking at it? Or maybe read minds?"

More looks.

"Forget that, how about trying to solve some big human problem. Like can you provide time travel, raise the dead, or anything like that? You see, if you could just cure cancer, you would not only be stinking rich but also very, very popular. That may not matter to you guys, but it's bloody good PR."

"PR?"

"It stands for public relations." I could see they had no idea what I was talking about, but I moved on. I was not about to start explaining the vagaries of that field.

"Maybe you can leverage your advanced technology in IT or telecom. If all else fails, you can always sell weaponry. Even if our world seems fairly peaceful, I assure you, there is always a market for killing machines."

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"Wouldn't that mean giving humans the means to defend yourselves against our kind?" one young slug asked.

"Not necessarily," I responded with authority, quieting a gurgling murmur of suspicion. "There are ways to make a bundle and still hold back the big guns — we Americans have been doing it for years. But what you folks need is a consultant. As a writer, words, not weapons, are my arsenal."

I gave them a few names and told them to give me a call when they got to the copywriting stage. How did these things survive for two minutes in space?

On my way down, an unfamiliar feeling came over me which I later recognized as the first inkling of fear. Even slower, it dawned on me why the creeping trepidation. On the conference table, spread amongst the half-chewed papers, was a book, the disturbing title of which was just coming into focus. One of those monsters was reading either a self-help manual or, equally bad, a recipe book.

The title: *Earthling Soup for the Soul.*

For the first time in my life, I faced a grave quandary. I had been going along for years putting words in the mouths of forest-rapers, slave-shop sport shoe-makers, and destroyers of indigenous people who made the world safe for strip-malls. I had always known that all is fair in business, that progress will go forward with or without me, and that I'd rather be writing credit card pitches to teenagers than monitoring the fry basket at Burger Queen.

I simply knew myself, and I knew what I needed first and foremost was a six-figure income. I lived for the best things in life. I did not design this world, but I was going to thrive in it.

This new account, however, required more than merely acting as an inevitable cog in a vast machinery of evil. I was actually playing a key role in the potential overthrow of human sovereignty.

Okay, that wasn't what really bothered me. The real bug in my bonnet was the idea that these things looked at humans not just as a civilization to be conquered or a market to be exploited, but as...well...food! I thought I would be insulated from the consequences of their conquest, but now I had to worry about being around when one of them got an appetite.

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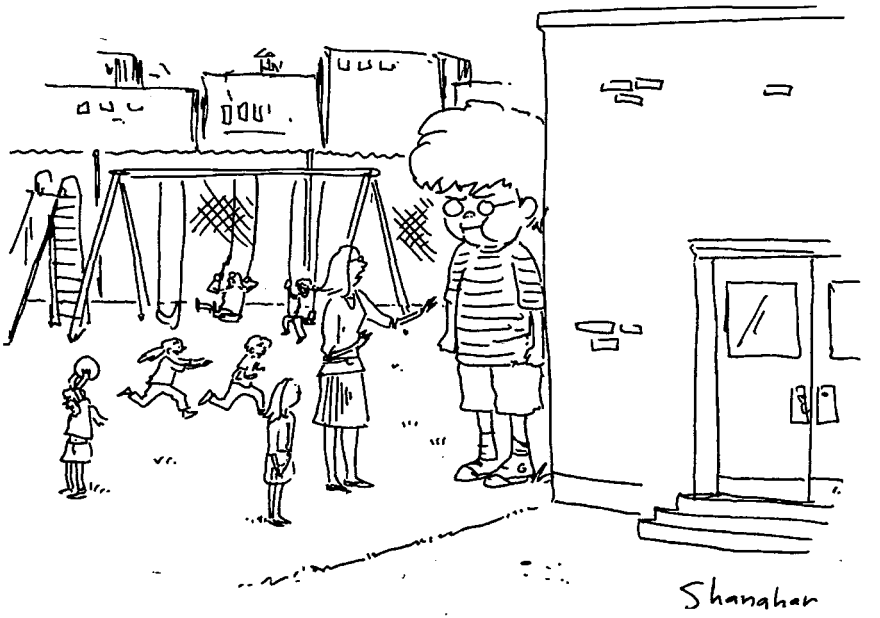
So I came to Margaritaville here. I doubt those goo balls will bother with this inconsequential island. I feel relatively safe and I've actually been getting a lot of writing done, here on the beach. At first it seemed so inconvenient, to be displaced by some icky aliens. I'm like a club med refugee! But I finally came to see that I have the makings of a blockbuster here. Think of it, my story will launch a whole new genre: the science fiction memoir. I'm sitting on publishing gold, my friend, just between you and me.



"Now show me what a really big boy you are, and spit Emily out."

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Mr. Williamson's latest story has a bit in common with "Afterlife" (from our February issue), but that's mostly because both stories are set in the same universe and both consider questions of mortality. Here the tale's focus is less on spirituality and more on action, but the results are no less thought-provoking.

The Planet of Youth

By Jack Williamson

THE PLANET WAS A LEGEND of the starways. As old spacemen told the story, it was the perfect world, totally terraformed, free of polar ice and tropic heat, densely forested, and richly productive. Its people were never ill, never aged, never died.

None of the tellers had been there, however, nor known anyone who had. When asked why it was missing from the charts, they said no traders ever called. It was far out toward the galactic rim, located at the edge of a great star cluster. Endowed with everything, its happy citizens made nothing to sell and had no need to buy.

I'd heard the tale in a hundred bars, never imagining a word of truth in it, until an aging space-breaker pilot named LeZarr came to the office and sat till I had time to see him. He gave me a package wrapped in bright gold foil. An old paper book when I opened it, gone brittle and yellow with age.

"The secret of life!" He was a hard-nosed veteran of the skyways by his looks, his mouth stained purple-red by the starkiss nuts he chewed.

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They gave him a faint bitter scent, and I saw a glint of madness in his eyes. "Read it," he said. "Show it to Mr. McDervik. A chance I think he'll take."

I'd seen so many scams I should have thrown him out, but he held me fixed with that crazy stare till I skimmed through the book. It was the life story of an All Souls missionary who claimed his church had sent him to the Planet of Youth to carry his own message of the life eternal.

"A Terra-type planet," he wrote, "in orbit around a Sol-type sun. I found the people godless. They claim they live forever and swear they never sin. I preached to them, prayed with them, tried to warn them of the dire peril to their immortal souls. They laughed at salvation."

I was about to laugh at him, till he opened the book and showed me a note on the flyleaf, written in faded red ink.

"Read this." He pointed with a stubby finger. "Galactic coordinates that locate a star known to have planets. It's off the trade routes, but I've plotted a five-skip route to take us there. Tell Mr. McDervik it's a business opportunity."

I hesitated. An interstellar tycoon, head of McDervik Pan-Galactic, he had no time for cranks.

"Tell him Fawn sent it." He paused for a wistful smile. "A girl you'd love. She claims to be his granddaughter, but I don't know. She works as a nurse for my wife's doctor. She's certainly not rich."

She wouldn't be, I thought.

"Vultures!" I'd heard him call his heirs. "All of you vultures! Swarming overhead and perched all around, hungry for the flesh on my bones."

He was my great-uncle and I knew his ways. He paid me peanuts, called me a stupid jerk, and worked me like a slave.

"You'll get it when I die," he used to say when I hinted for a raise. "I'm leaving you the planet Grand Bonanza. It's just opened for settlement and rich in everything. As proprietor, you can tax it for trillions."

Nobody loved him, but that promise had always tempted me to endure his ugly ways and hang on as his general factotum and favorite punching bag.

"Please sir," LeZarr begged me now. "If you knew my wife — " Pain twisted his purple lips. "A martyr and a saint! She stayed here on Earth and raised three kids while I was off risking my life over half the galaxy. Now

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I'm okay and she's sick and dying of a rare mutation the medics can't reverse. If that planet has something that could save her — "

He looked so woeful that I took him up to McDervik's top-floor office.

Physically, McDervik was zero. Twisted and totally hairless from a nameless malady his space-going father had picked up out toward the rim, he wore a sleek black wig. His back was bent with age, his left arm shriveled. He hobbled about on a silver cane. Yet he owned half a thousand planets.

He'd hunted for sport as long as he was able. His huge desk, at the center of a high spire room in the Pan-Galactic tower, was surrounded with his off-Earth trophies, monsters apt to startle unwarned visitors. Wide windows all around the room looked down upon the city roofs. At McDervik Starport, out in the distance, a sleek silver space-breaker was just lifting to skip a hundred light-years in no time at all.

We found him hunched at the desk, yelling at an unlucky flunky. He left us standing until the quivering victim had scuttled off to the elevator, then turned at last to stab LeZarr with a dagger stare.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Space-breaker pilot Jean LeZarr, sir. License Number Q7B, Polaris Sector Nine. Rating First Class, Range Unlimited." He laid his license and the missionary's book on the desk. "Sir, here is a gift from your granddaughter Fawn — "

"What the hell does she want?"

"Nothing, sir. But a note on the flyleaf tells the way to the fabulous Planet of Youth."

"A fabulous con!" McDervik gave him a yellow-fanged snarl. "Invented to milk the fools who believe it."

"Look at the book." LeZarr held his ground. "It contains plausible evidence that it actually exists."

"Why the devil should you care?"

"I care for her." He laid a holo card on the desk. The image of a woman's head sprang into the air above it, feebly smiling. She might have been beautiful once, but her pale features looked wasted, her blonde hair thin and dull. "She's dying, sir, unless something off that planet can save her."

"What's that to me?"

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"Sir, you'll forgive me — " LeZarr took a moment to scan McDervik's damaged body. "Suppose the planet's real? Suppose we could all be young again? Just think about it."

I saw a flash of anger, but McDervik caught himself to squint at the holo image, scrutinize the license again, riffle through the book. He finally scowled at the ancient date and tossed the book back at LeZarr with a grimace from some chronic ache.

"I think it's a trap for greedy idiots."

LeZarr caught the book and held it to his heart.

"Only five skips, sir. Be there in a day. Back in another if it's just a mirage. I'll guide you there for nothing, sir."

McDervik had a nose for luck.

"What's to lose?" He squinted at the book. "You lead the way. I'll pay your charter fees. Leave your flight plan with my pilot. Signal him if you find the planet, which ain't likely. Wait in orbit if you do, till I can join you for the landing."

He paid the charter fees and we waited for the signal.

"Planet reached," it ran. "Fits description. Waiting in polar orbit for your arrival."

We followed in his star yacht and found LeZarr safe in orbit. He docked with us and came aboard. McDervik greeted him with a doubtful scowl.

"So what have we got?"

"A perfect planet!" LeZarr gestured at the planet, a great blue globe, splashed with green continents and bright cloud spirals, spinning lazily beneath us. "But people?" He frowned and shook his head. "No cities I can see. No railways. No big dams. No industrial smoke. I called to identify myself. Asked for a landing permit. Got no reply."

"Permit or not, I'm going down."

We launched a lander and glided down. Skimming the forests on the continent, we saw no marks of civilization. LeZarr set us down on a wide meadow between a ridge of sandstone cliffs and a tall wall of trees. He unsealed the lock and cycled out to test the air.

"As fresh as a Terran spring," he reported. "I heard a trilling like a lark in the sky."

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McDervik limped off the lander armed for battle, a wrinkled warrior gnome in a camouflage-dyed safari suit, weighed down with a leather ammunition harness, a long-barreled projectile launcher hung at one hip and a wicked-looking knife sheathed at the other. A holocam was slung around his skinny neck.

We found no foes. Animals I took for Terran zebras were grazing peacefully across the meadow, but the enormous bird standing in a waterhole was nothing imported from old Earth. As tall as I was, it had a graceful body that caught the morning sun like burnished silver. Long-legged and long-necked, it was feeding, stabbing at something in the water with a needle-keen beak.

It ignored us at first, but took flight when McDervik unslung the holocam, spreading great wings in an explosion of crimson and gold and flapping off across the treetops. LeZarr caught my arm, pointing to a monster striding out of the forest. Lizard-like and long-tailed, it came stalking on two massive legs. Its towering body was armored with wide green plates, its great-jawed head topped with a saw-toothed crimson crest.

McDervik snatched for his gun.

"Sir, don't shoot!" LeZarr warned him sharply. "Not unless you have to."

The monster stalked past us and on through the little herd of grazing zebras. Some of them moved to give it room, but they showed no alarm. A flight of tiny, bright blue birds came to whirl around us, singing like canaries, and followed it into the trees.

"An actual Eden!" LeZarr whispered. "Like the missionary said. I've seen a hundred worlds, and still I can't believe it!"

"If it's Eden, show me the angels." McDervik scowled at the empty meadow and stopped to point with a shriveled arm. "What's that?"

I caught a silver flash, where the sun struck a dome of something like polished silver, almost lost in a grove of blue-blooming trees.

"A dwelling?" LeZarr shaded his eyes. "And people!"

A woman in something red came walking toward us from beyond the waterhole. McDervik raised his binoculars to watch a dozen others following out of the forest. They were gaily clad in rainbow-colored saris, their arms and heads uncovered. Some of them carried baskets.

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"They look young enough." He lowered the glasses, frowning. "But where are any children?"

"They wouldn't have children," LeZarr said. "Not if they're actually immortal. Children would overcrowd the planet."

"Forget the kids!" McDervik muttered. "We're here on business."

We had moved to meet them, but they trooped on beyond us to crowd like children around the lander, pointing at the skip engines, fingering the bright silver trim. I caught scraps of carefree talk, the accents oddly soft but our own English.

LeZarr sighed. "I wish my wife could be that happy."

THE WOMAN IN RED came back to us. Well revealed by the tight sari, she was vigorous and attractive, with long, ginger-colored hair that fell free behind her back.

"You come from the stars?" She frowned sharply at McDervik and his weapons. "We want no conflict here."

"Neither do we." He had a wolfish charm when he chose to use it. He turned it on her now, and got a childish smile. "We are only students touring the galaxy. We came here in search of the famous Planet of Youth. Have we found it?"

"Youth?" She gave him a puzzled frown. "We are not young."

"You look young. And very lovely." He waited for her to smile again. "If I may ask — " His yellow eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Are you immortal?"

"Immor — " The word seemed to baffle her. "What is that?"

"Do people die?"

"Die?"

She was still bewildered. McDervik shook his head and turned to LeZarr for help.

"They stop breathing," LeZarr said. "Stop moving. Fall down. Decay."

"Animals do, sometimes." She nodded. "Unless Doc Scott is there to fix them."

"Ho!" McDervik nudged LeZarr in the ribs. "I think we're in business." Eagerly, he turned back to her. "Can you tell what he does for animals?"

"How would I know?" Vaguely, she shrugged. "I'm not a doctor."

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"We must see him. Can you help us find him?"

"Tomorrow, perhaps."

McDervik scowled. "Why not right now?"

"We're on our way to the songfest."

"May we come with you?"

Uncertainly, she turned to look at her companions.

He warmed his voice and used his charm. "Please!"

That captured her. Her name was Aranda. She called her friends away from the ship and told them we were guests from the stars. They smiled politely and shook our hands in the way of Earth, but seemed to care nothing for the stars.

LeZarr refused to leave the lander unguarded, but McDervik and I went on with Aranda, following a footpath toward the cliffs. We found a gathering crowd below a sort of natural stage outside a shallow cave eroded into a wall of red sandstone.

Groups were spreading mats on the grass, opening baskets filled with food and bottled wine. They were vegetarians, the dishes strange to us. There were huge crimson mushrooms with almost the flavor of a rare beefsteak, wide flat mushrooms with the taste of freshly buttered toast, tart green fruits, bowls of honey-sweet purple berries.

McDervik unslung the holocam and thrust it at me.

"Get it all. A vision of paradise! I want it for promotion and sales."

He had me shoot a panorama of our ship and the waterhole and the forest around us, then the singers on their natural stage. He wanted close-ups of the food baskets and Aranda in her red sari. He posed with his stringy arm around her.

"Evidence!" He was exultant. "Evidence to convince the universe."

He was ignoring the songs. I caught few of the words, but I began to hear emotion in the voices, tension and triumph, finally a sense of calm contentment. Aranda opened a bottle of wine. His doctors on Earth had forbidden alcohol, and at first he refused it.

"It can't hurt you," she urged him. "Not if Doc Scott can fix you the way he does the animals."

Perhaps he was yielding to the spell of the songs. He drank a glass, asked for another, and finally went to sleep lying beside her on the grass. The afternoon sun had sunk low before the songfest ended and people

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began gathering their baskets and rolling the mats. McDervik roused himself to ask when we could see the doctor.

"Tomorrow morning," Aranda promised. "I'll come to take you."

We slept on the lander, and woke to a songbird serenade. A warm sun was climbing into a clear blue sky, the fresh air fragrant from the many-colored blooms that spangled the meadow. LeZarr took a deep breath when we came outside, and borrowed the holocam to shoot a little herd of African impala drinking at the waterhole.

"It looks too perfect!" He shook his head. "Too perfect to be true."

Aranda was late. McDervik fumed all morning, hobbling around the lander and watching for her. The sun was almost overhead before she arrived in a sleek golden sari. With no apology, she caught him in a close embrace, kissed both his wrinkled cheeks, and asked if he was ready to see the doctor.

LeZarr stayed again to guard the lander. She led us into the forest, along a gravel footpath neatly curbed with colored stones. The trees were spaced well apart, bright with flowering vines that draped the lower branches. When we saw a dozen antelope grazing across a sun-dappled glade, Aranda stopped to call out as if she knew them by name. They raised graceful heads to look for a moment, and grazed again.

The doctor's house stood in an open clearing, a small stone building roofed with red tile. A faded sign above the door read CARTER SCOTT, M. D. We found him spading a vegetable garden behind it. Lean, dark-haired, and tall, he wore a T-shirt and faded jeans. He greeted Aranda with a kiss and turned to smile at us.

"Guests from outside." She gave him our names. "They seem worn and broken, like unlucky animals." She waited for him to scan McDervik's bent and shrunken frame. "Can you repair them?"

"A nanorob transfer? It should be possible."

He beckoned us toward wicker chairs on a veranda that looked out across the clearing to a solitary tree, dead but aflame with flowering vines. "We seldom see outsiders. Tell me about yourselves."

"Dirk McDervik. I own McDervik Pan-Galactic." Expansively, he gestured at the sky. "You may have heard of it."

The doctor looked blank. McDervik shrugged and asked about nanorob transfers.

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"The nanorobs are microscopic robots," he said. "Expert physicians, really, that replicate themselves and circulate through the body. They function to heal or replace damaged cells. The technology was developed back on Earth a thousand years ago, but outlawed by a backward government."

"Outlawed? What went wrong?"

"The rulers." Scott sighed and sat for a moment staring off into the cloudless sky. "They tried to exterminate us and our nanorobs, but nanorobs are hard to kill. We were finally allowed to charter ships and migrate to this planet, remote from everywhere. There was only one condition, that we never leave."

He shrugged and grinned at McDervik.

"So here we'll be forever."

"You are a doctor?"

"Trained back on Earth, before the nanorobs. Internist and cardiac surgeon. I was good at it." I thought he looked wistful. "There's no need for surgery here. I do bandage up a few accidental flesh wounds until the nanorobs can close them, or set an occasional broken bone. Most of my patients are the native creatures or the few terrestrial animals we brought with us. I let the nanorobs do the actual healing."

McDervik leaned eagerly forward.

"Can they heal me?"

"If you like. They don't fail."

"Then I'm your patient. Just name your fee."

"We've no use for money here." He waved it away. "I recall the foolish money games we used to play back on Earth. Here I've found a more rewarding sport. Higher math. That's a world of infinite complexities that can challenge you forever, with no loss or pain to anybody else."

He led us into his house, through a long, sparsely furnished room with a fireplace at one end and bookshelves at the other, the walls painted with mural landscapes of ancient Earth. We came into a smaller room that was evidently both kitchen and office. Pots and pans hung around a big ceramic stove at one end. Shelves of bottles, glassware, and bright metal instruments surrounded a high table at the other.

McDervik stopped to squint at them doubtfully.

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"Low-tech." Scott shrugged a vague apology. "Creating the nanorobs took the best technology we had, but here we can be content with simpler things."

He washed his hands at the kitchen sink and came back to light a little lamp and sterilize a needle. Aranda and McDervik sat on the edge of the table. He swabbed their arms with alcohol, drew a drop of her blood on a glass slide, and pressed it against a scratch on his, and said that was all.

"All?" McDervik was incredulous.

"The nanorobs will multiply," Scott said. "Come back if you have questions."

McDervik was jubilant when we got back to the lander.

"The secret of eternity!" he greeted LeZarr. "I'll own the universe! As soon as my attorneys can lock up the patent rights! Men will stand in line to mortgage their souls for immortality."

Feeling high through the afternoon, he made a big meal from a basket that Aranda had left for us. He drank most of a bottle of wine, expanding great schemes to franchise the nanorobs on every settled planet. Generously, he offered to make LeZarr a franchisee, with free immortality for his wife. We went to sleep on the lander. He woke me about midnight, hunched over the controls and screaming at LeZarr.

"Take us off!" Glaring at us, his eyes were wide and wild. "That scheming quack! He's poisoned me! Coming now to steal the ship!"

"Sir, please!" LeZarr tried to calm him. "The lock's sealed. We're safe inside. I'm afraid you're out of your head."

McDervik swung back to the controls. LeZarr tried to pull him away. He struck back and sent LeZarr staggering. I tried to help. He fought us off with a strength that seemed superhuman, till suddenly he crumpled to the deck and lay there gasping, his eyes rolling back in his head. We lifted him into a berth. Hot with fever, he lay there the rest of the night, sometimes limply lifeless, sometimes tossing, striking blindly out at nothing, moaning, screaming that he was dying.

"Stop — stop the bugs!" He sat up once, yelling hoarsely. "They're in my blood! Burning — burning my skin! Crawling in my veins. Eating — eating my brain!"

He calmed at last, begged for water and seemed to sleep, hoarsely

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snoring. Once again he woke in a better mood, laughing at nothing, shouting in a strange voice, trying to sing a song we had heard. He sank at last into a coma so deep we couldn't rouse him, still hot and drenched with sweat.

Aranda came at dawn. She felt his forehead and promised to send for Dr. Scott. Some of her friends brought food he couldn't eat, and carried him off the lander to a cot under a little tent, where they hoped the fresh air would help him. Scott came that afternoon, put a stethoscope to his heart, and told us not to worry.

"A strong reaction to the nanorobs," he said. "A lot of physical abuse and decay to be repaired, but they're taking hold. His future health should be perfect. Call me if you need me."

WE WERE THERE another week. Aranda came every day to bathe McDervik, give him water when he could drink, hold his hand when he moaned in distress. On the third day he woke from his coma. Weak at first, he soon had a ravenous appetite for the fruits and mushroom she brought us, though he wanted nothing from the ship's supplies.

His blighted arm was suddenly strong again, his wrinkles smoothed into a youthful smile. He walked without his cane to watch the zebras coming to the waterhole. Aranda brought food and wine to celebrate his recovery, and we sat around folding tables set up beside the ship. Dr. Scott took his pulse and called him fit as a kid.

"And free to go if the nanorobs will let you."

"Why should we go?" Grinning with elation, he glanced at me. "We've found all we ever longed for. The perfect life on the perfect planet! We're immortal as the gods we used to imagine, free of pain, immune to trouble. Why throw it all away?"

"There's Pan-Galactic," I told him. "Your responsibilities."

"Pan-Galactic?" He squinted off into the empty sky. "Why bother?"

He grinned at Aranda and turned to me.

"Tell LeZarr he can go. Unless he wants to stay here with us."

I found LeZarr on the ship, checking his star charts.

"The hell with 'em!" he exploded. "I'm getting back to my wife, but not to murder her with bugs in her brain. You want to know why these

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zombies never die? They're already dead. Meat machines, run by those little devils swarming in their blood. No wonder they were shipped way out here."

He offered me a starkiss nut.

"My own poison of choice. Let McDervik pick his own. But tell him I can't take off without a signed release from his charter contract. Proof for the authorities that I didn't abandon him to die on some airless rock."

McDervik was in no hurry to sign anything. Aranda had opened her basket and a bottle of wine.

"Drink all you want," Scott told him. "No headaches here."

McDervik sat beside Aranda and let her feed him tidbits. We sat there till dusk with the feast and wine, learning her folksongs. The planet is deep in the star cluster, and the night sky was suddenly ablaze with more stars and brighter stars than I had ever seen. When I marveled at them, Aranda left McDervik with another bottle of wine and caught my hand.

"Come along," she whispered. "I've something else to show you."

Down at the waterhole, we found its surface brighter than the sky, shimmering with reflections of the luminous night flowers in bloom all around it. Their heavy fragrance was more intoxicating than the wine. A night bird was singing somewhere, and she was lovely in the magical starlight. She sighed and drew me closer. I slid my arm around her waist. She let her body melt against me and gave me a kiss I won't forget.

"Stay with us!" she breathed in my ear. "Please! You're somebody new and you'll love it here!"

Her own sweet odor is the last thing I remember. LeZarr got me back on the ship. He woke me next morning, and stuck a pen and paper in my face.

"The charter contract." He was crunching a starkiss nut, and my stomach roiled from its burnt-toast scent. "Sign the release if you want to stay here."

My head was splitting, and my vision blurred the pen, but I felt glad to have no nanorobs in my blood. I pushed the contract away. An hour later, we were taking off. Looking back, I saw McDervik and Aranda standing by the waterhole, holding hands as they waved farewell. The planet shrank behind us till LeZarr cut the jets and I saw the coupled ships

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shining in the sun. We left McDervik's yacht still safe in polar orbit, its robot crew left there to wait for him forever.

We skipped back home. Our story of an actual planet of youth was greeted with disbelief that turned to consternation. McDervik had never named a successor to head Pan-Galactic. His heirs sued the company, demanding an immediate reading of his will. He had left no will. The company attorneys produced his signature on the charter contract as proof that he was still alive. They set up a trust to administer his affairs, and the trustees seem likely to control the company forever.

They have let me go, with a platinum-cased multiplanet timepiece and a certificate of recognition for faithful service to McDervik Pan-Galactic. I'll never inherit the planet he promised me, but LeZarr introduced me to Fawn, McDervik's granddaughter, who is lovelier than Aranda and totally alive. She's no heiress now, but seems not to care. We are migrating from Earth to find a new home on Grand Bonanza. ☙

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Yes, the author of this story is the same Gardner Dozois who edits Asimov's Science Fiction *magazine and many anthologies (how many people do you think there are with the name "Gardner Dozois"! But please note that the founding editor of* 8-Track Mind *is not the same Gordon Van Gelder as this magazine's editor, so go figure). Mr. Dozois's last appearance in our pages was more than seven years ago, with "A Cat Horror Story" back in 1994. Fortunately, he has been more prolific of late, with recent works including the collection* Strange Days *and the long series of interviews conducted by Michael Swanwick assembled in* Being Gardner Dozois.

When one thinks of writers who combine sports and science fiction, names like Effinger, Wilber, and Reed come to mind more readily than does Dozois, but this year he takes us out to the old ball game...with unusual results.

The Hanging Curve

By Gardner Dozois

IT WAS A COOL OCTOBER night in Philadelphia, with a wet wind coming off the river that occasionally shifted to bring in the yeasty spoiled-beer smell of the nearby refineries. Independence Stadium, the relatively new South Philly stadium that had been built to replace the old Veteran's Stadium, which still stood deserted a block or so away, was filled to capacity, and then some, with people standing in the aisles. It was the last game of a hard-fought and bitterly contested World Series between the New York Yankees and the Philadelphia Phillies, 3-2 in favor of the Phillies, the Yankees at bat with two out in the top of the ninth inning, and a man on third base. Eduardo Rivera was at bat for the Yankees against pitcher Karl Holzman, the Yankees' best slugger against the Phillies' best stopper, and Holzman had run a full count on Rivera, 3-2. Everything depended on the next pitch.

Holzman went into his slow, deliberate windup. Everybody in the stadium was leaning forward, everybody was holding their breath. Though there were almost ten thousand people in the stands, nobody was making

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a sound. Even the TV announcers were tense and silent. Hey, there it is! The *pitch* —

Some pundits later said that what was about to happen happened *because* the game was so tight, because so much was riding on the next pitch — that it was the psychic energy of the thousands of fans in the stands, the millions more in the viewing audience at home, every eye and every mind focused on that particular moment. That what happened was *caused* by the tension and the ever-tightening suspense felt by millions of people hanging on the outcome of that particular pitch....

And yet, in the more than a century and a half that people had been playing professional baseball, there had been many games as important as this one, many contests as closely fought, many situations as tense or tenser, with as much or more passion invested in the outcome — and yet what happened that night had never happened before, in any other game.

Holzman pitched. The ball left his hand, streaked toward the plate....

And then it froze.

The ball just *stopped*, inches from the plate, and hung there, motionless, in midair.

After a second of stunned surprise, Rivera stepped forward and took a mighty hack at the motionless ball. He broke his bat on it, sending splinters flying high. But the ball itself didn't move.

The catcher sat back on his butt with a thump, then, after a second, began to scoot backward, away from the plate. He was either praying or cursing in Spanish, perhaps both. Hurriedly, he crossed himself.

The home-base umpire, Kellenburger, had been struck dumb with astonishment for a moment, but now he raised his hands to call time. He took his mask off and came a few steps closer to lean forward and peer at the ball, where it hung impossibly in midair.

The umpire was the first to actually touch the ball. Gingerly, he poked it with his finger, an act either very brave or very foolish, considering the circumstances. "It felt like a baseball," he later said, letting himself in for a great deal of comic ridicule by late-night talk show hosts, but it really wasn't that dumb a remark, again considering the circumstances. It certainly wasn't *acting* like a baseball.

He tried to scoop the ball out of the air. It wouldn't budge. When he

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took his hand away, there it still was, the ball, hanging motionless a few feet above home plate.

The fans in the stadium had been shocked into stunned silence for a few heartbeats. But now a buzzing whisper of reaction began to swell, soon growing into a waterfall roar. No one understood what had happened. But *something* had happened to stop the game at the most critical possible moment, and nobody liked it. Fistfights were already beginning to break out in the outfield bleachers.

Rivera had stepped forward to help Kellenburger tug at the ball, trying to muscle it down. They couldn't move it. Holzman, as puzzled as everyone else, walked in to see what in the world was going on. Managers flew out of the dugouts, ready to protest *something*, although they weren't quite sure *what*. The rest of the umpires trotted in to take a look. Soon home plate was surrounded by almost everybody who was down on the ballfield, both dugouts emptying, all shouting, arguing, making suggestions, jostling to get a close look at the ball, which hung serenely in midair.

Within minutes, fights were breaking out on the field as well. The stadium cops were already having trouble trying to quell disturbances in the seats, where a full-fledged riot was brewing. They couldn't handle it. The fans began tearing up the seats, trampling each other in panicked or angry surges, pouring out on to the field to join in fistfights with the players. The city cops had to be called in, then more cops, then the riot squad, who set about forcibly closing the stadium, chasing the outraged fans out with tear gas and rubber bullets. Dozens of people were injured, some moderately seriously, but, by some other miracle, none were killed. Dozens of people were arrested, including some of the players and the manager of the Yankees. The stadium was seriously trashed. By the time the umpires got around to officially calling the game, it had become clear a long time before that World Series or no World Series, no game was going to be played in Independence Stadium that night, or, considering the damage that had been done to the bleachers, probably for many nights to come.

Finally, the last ambulance left, and the remaining players and grounds crew and assorted team personnel were herded out, still complaining and arguing. After a hurried conference between the police and the owners, the gates were locked behind them.

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The ball still hung there, not moving. In the empty stadium, gleaming white under the lights, it somehow looked even more uncanny than it had with people swarming around it. Two cops were left behind to keep an eye on it, but the sight spooked them, and they stayed as far away from it as they could without leaving the infield, checking it every few minutes as the long night crept slowly past. But the ball didn't seem to be going anywhere.

Most of the riot had been covered live across the nation, of course, television cameras continuing to roll as fans and players beat each other bloody, while the sportscasters provided hysterical commentary (and barricaded the doors of the press room). Reporters from local stations had been there within twenty minutes, but nobody knew quite how to handle the event that had sparked the riot in the first place; most ignored it, while others treated it as a Silly Season item. The reporters were back the next morning, though, some of them, anyway, as the owners and the grounds crew, more cops, the Commissioner of Baseball, and some Concerned City Hall Bigwigs went back into the stadium. In spite of the bright, grainy, mundane light of morning, which is supposed to chase all fancies away and dissolve all troubling fantasms, the ball was still frozen there in midair, motionless, exactly the same way it had been the night before. It looked even spookier though, more bewilderingly inexplicable, under the ordinary light of day than it had looked under the garish artificial lighting the night before. This was no trick of the eyes, no confusion of light and shadow. Although it *couldn't* be, the goddamn thing was *there*.

The grounds crew did everything that they could think of to get the ball to move, including tying a rope around it and having a dozen hefty men yank and heave and strain at it, their feet scrambling for purchase, as if they were playing tug-of-war with Mighty Joe Young and losing, but they could no more move the ball than Kellenburger had been able to the night before.

It was becoming clear that it might be a long time before another game could be played in Independence Stadium.

After two days of heated debate in the highest baseball circles, Yankee Stadium was borrowed to restage the potential final out of the series. Thousands of fans in the stadium (who had paid heretofore unheard-of prices for tickets) and millions of television viewers watched breathlessly

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as Holzman went into his windup and delivered the ball to the plate at a respectable ninety-five miles-per-hour. But nothing happened except that Rivera took a big swing at the ball and missed. No miracle. The ball thumped solidly into the catcher's mitt (who'd had to be threatened with heavy sanctions to get him to play, and who had a crucifix, a St. Christopher's medal, *and* an evil-eye-warding set of horns hung around his neck). Kellenburger, the home-plate umpire, pumped his fist and roared "You're out!" in a decisive, no-nonsense tone. And that was that. The Philadelphia Phillies had won the World Series.

The fans tore up the seats. Parts of New York City burned. The riots were still going on the following afternoon, as were riots in Philadelphia and (for no particular reason anyone could see; perhaps they were sympathy riots) in Cincinnati.

After another emergency session, the Commissioner announced that entire last game would be replayed, in the interests of fairness. This time, the Yankees won, 7-5.

After more rioting, the Commissioner evoked special executive powers that no one was quite sure he had, and declared that the Series was a draw. This satisfied nobody, but eventually fans stopped burning down bits of various cities, and the situation quieted.

The bizarre result went into the record books, and baseball tried to put the whole thing behind it.

In the larger world outside the insular universe of baseball, things weren't quite that simple.

Dozens of newspapers across the country had independently — and perhaps inevitably — come up with the headline HANGING CURVE BALL!!!, screamed across the front page in the largest type they could muster. A novelty song of the same name was in stores within four days of the Event, and available for download on some internet sites in two. Nobody knows for sure how long it took for the first Miracle Ball joke to appear, but they were certainly circulating widely by as early as the following morning, when the strange non-ending of the World Series was the hot topic of discussion in most of the workplaces and homes in America (and, indeed, around the world), even those homes where baseball had rarely — if ever — been discussed before.

Media hysteria about the Miracle Ball continued to build throughout

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the circus of replaying the World Series; outside of sports circles, where the talk tended to center around the dolorous affect all this was having on baseball, the focus was on the Miracle itself, and what it might — or might not — signify. Hundreds of conspiracy-oriented internet sites, of various degrees of lunacy, appeared almost overnight. Apocalyptic religious cults sprang up almost as fast as wacko internet sites. The Miracle was widely taken as a Sign that the Last Days were at hand, as nearly anything out of the ordinary had been, from an earthquake to Jesus's face on a taco, for the last thousand years. Within days, some people in California had sold their houses and all their worldly possessions and had begun walking barefoot toward Philadelphia.

After the Gates-of-Armageddon-are-gaping-wide theory, the second most popular theory, and the one with the most internet sites devoted to it, was that Aliens had done it — although as nobody ever came up with an even remotely convincing reason *why* aliens would want to do this, that theory tended to run out of gas early, and never was as popular as the Apocalypse Now/Sign from the Lord theory. The respectable press tended to ridicule both of these theories (as well as the Sinister Government Conspiracy theory, a dark horse, but popular in places like Montana and Utah) — still, it was hard for even the most determined skeptic to deny that *something* was going on that no one could even begin to explain, something that defied the laws of physics as we thought we knew them, and more than one scientist, press-ganged into appearing on late-night talk shows or other Talking Head venues, burbled that if we could learn to understand the strange cosmic forces, whatever they were, that were making the Ball act as it was acting, whole new sciences would open up, and Mankind's technological expertise could be advanced a thousand years.

Up until this point, the government had been ignoring the whole thing, obviously not taking it seriously, but now, perhaps jolted into action by watching scientists on *The Tonight Show* enthuse about the wondrous new technologies that might be there for the taking, they made up for lost time (and gave a boost to the Sinister Government Conspiracy theory) by swooping down and seizing Independence Stadium, excluding all civilians from the property.

The city and the owners protested, then threatened to sue, but the

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feds smacked them with Eminent Domain and stood pat (eventually they would be placated by the offer to build a new stadium elsewhere in the city, at government expense; since you certainly couldn't play a game in the Independence Stadium anyway, with *that* thing hanging in the air, the owners were not really all that hard to convince). Hordes of scientists and spooks from various alphabet-soup agencies swarmed over the playing field. A ring of soldiers surrounded the stadium day and night, military helicopters hovered constantly overhead to keep other helicopters with prying television cameras away, and when it occurred to somebody that this wouldn't be enough to frustrate spy satellites or high-flying spy planes, a huge tent enclosure was raised over the entire infield, hiding the Ball from sight.

Months went by, then years. No news about the Miracle Baseball was coming out of Independence Stadium, although by now a tent city had been raised in the surrounding parking lots to house the influx of government-employed scientists, who were kept in strict isolation. Occasionally, a fuss would be made in the media or a motion would be raised in Congress in protest of such stringent secrecy, but the government was keeping the lid down tight, in spite of wildfire rumors that scientists were conferring with UFO Aliens in there, or had opened a dimensional gateway to another universe.

The cultists, who had been refused admittance to Independence Stadium to venerate the Ball, when they'd arrived with blistered and bleeding feet from California several months after the Event, erected a tent city of their own across the street from the government's tent city, and could be seen keeping vigil day and night in all weathers, as if they expected God to pop his head out of the stadium to say hello at any moment, and didn't want to miss it. (They eventually filed suit against the government for interfering with their freedom to worship by refusing them access to the Ball, and the suit dragged through the courts for years, with no conclusive results.)

The lack of information coming out of Independence Stadium did nothing to discourage media speculation, of course. In fact, it was like pouring gasoline on a fire, and for several years it was difficult to turn on a television set at any time of the day or night without finding *somebody* saying *something* about the Miracle Ball, even if it was only on the PBS

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channels. Most of the players and officials who were down on the field When It Happened became minor media celebrities, and did the rounds of all the talk shows. Rivera, the batter who'd been at the plate that night, refused to talk about it, seeming bitter and angry about the whole thing — the joke was that Rivera was pissed because God had been scared to pitch to him — but Holzman, the pitcher, showed an unexpected philosophical bent — pitchers were all head-cases anyway, baseball fans told each other — and was a fixture on the talk show circuit for years, long after he'd retired from the game. "I'm not sure it proves the existence of God," he said one night. "You'd think that God would have better things to do. But it sure shows that there are forces at work in the universe we don't understand." Later, on another talk show, discussing the theory that heavenly intervention had kept his team from winning the Series, Holzman famously said, "I don't know, maybe God *is* a Yankees fan — but if He hates the Phillies all that much, wouldn't it have been a lot easier just to let Rivera get a *hit*?"

In the second year after the Event, a book called *Schrödinger's Baseball*, written by a young Harvard physicist, postulated the theory that those watching the game in the stadium that night had been so evenly split between Yankees fans wanting Rivera to get a hit and Phillies fans wanting him to strike out, the balance so exquisitely perfect between the two opposing pools of observers, that the quantum wave function had been unable to "decide" which way to collapse, and so had just frozen permanently into an indeterminate state, not resolving itself into *either* outcome. This was immediately derided as errant nonsense by other scientists, but the book became an international bestseller of epic proportions, staying at the top of the lists for twenty months, and, although it had no plot at all, was later optioned for a (never made) Big Budget movie for a hefty seven-figure advance.

Eventually, more than four years later, after an election where public dislike of the Secret of Independence Stadium had played a decisive role, a new administration took charge and belatedly declared an Open Door policy, welcoming in civilian scientists, even those from other nations, and, of course, the media.

As soon became clear, they had little to lose. Nothing had changed in almost half a decade. The Ball still hung there in midair. Nothing could

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move it. Nothing could affect it. The government scientists had tried taking core samples, but no drill bit would bite. They'd tried dragging it away with tractor-hauled nets and with immense magnetic fields, and neither the brute-force nor the high-tech approach had worked. They'd measured it and the surrounding space and the space above and below it with every instrument anybody could think of, and discovered nothing. They'd hit it with high-intensity laser beams, they'd tried crisping it with plasma and with flame-throwers, they'd shot hugely powerful bolts of electricity into it. Nothing had worked.

They'd learned nothing from the Ball, in spite of years of intensive, round-the-clock observation with every possible instrumentation, in spite of hundreds of millions of dollars spent, in spite of dozens of scientists working themselves into nervous exhaustion, mental breakdowns, and emotional collapse. No alien secrets. No heretofore unexpected forces of nature (none that they'd learned to identify and control, anyway). The Ball was just *there*. Who knew why? Or how?

More years of intensive investigation by scientists from around the world followed, but eventually, as years stretched into decades, even the scientists began to lose interest. Most ordinary people had lost interest long before, when the Miracle Ball resolutely refused to do anything else remarkable, or even moderately non-boring.

Baseball the sport did its best to pretend the whole thing had never happened. Game attendance had soared for a while, as people waited for the same thing to happen again, then, when it didn't, declined disastrously, falling to record lows. Several major-league franchises went out of business (although, oddly, sandlot and minor-league games were as popular as ever), and those who were lucky enough to survive did their best to see that the Ball was rarely mentioned in the sports pages.

Other seasons went into the record books, none tainted by the miraculous.

Forty more years went by.

Frederick Kellenburger had not been a young man even when he officiated at home plate during the Event. Now he was fabulously old, many decades into his retirement, and had chosen to spend the remaining few years of his life living in a crumbling old brownstone building in what remained of a South Philadelphia neighborhood, a couple of blocks from

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Independence Stadium. In the last few years, almost against his will, since he had spent decades resolutely trying to put the whole business behind him, he had become fascinated with the Event, with the Ball — in a mellow, non-obsessive kind of way, since he was of a calm, phlegmatic, even contemplative, temperament. He didn't expect to solve any mysteries, where so many others had failed. Still, he had nothing better to do with the residue of his life, and as almost everybody else who had been involved with the Event was dead by now, or else tucked away in nursing homes, it seemed appropriate somehow that someone who had been there from the start should keep an eye on the Ball.

He spent the long, sleepless nights of extreme old age on his newly acquired (only twenty years old) hobby of studying the letters and journals of the Knights of St. John of twelfth-century Rhodes, a hobby that appealed to him in part just because it was so out of character for a retired baseball umpire, and an area in which, to everyone's surprise — including his own — he had become an internationally recognized authority. Days, he would pick up a lightweight cloth folding chair, and hobble the few blocks to Independence Stadium, moving very, very slowly, like an ancient tortoise hitching itself along a beach in the Galapagos Islands. Hurry wasn't needed, even if he'd been capable of it. This neighborhood had been nearly deserted for years. There was no traffic, rarely anybody around. The slowly rising Atlantic lapped against the base of the immense Jersey Dike a few blocks to the east, and most of the buildings here were abandoned, boarded-up, falling down. Weeds grew through cracks in the middle of the street. For decades now, the city had been gradually, painfully, ponderously shifting itself to higher ground to the west, as had all the other cities of the slowly foundering East Coast, and few people were left in this neighborhood except squatters, refugees from Camden and Atlantic City who could afford nothing better, and a few stubborn South Philly Italians almost as old as he was, who'd been born here and were refusing to leave. No one paid any attention to an old man inching his way down the street. No one bothered him. It was oddly peaceful.

Independence Stadium itself was half-ruined, falling down, nearly abandoned. The tent cities were long gone. There was a towheaded, lazily smiling young boy with an old and probably non-functional assault rifle who was supposed to keep people out of the Stadium, but Kellenburger

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bribed him with a few small coins every few days, and he always winked and looked the other way. There were supposed to be cameras continuously running, focused on the Ball, part of an ongoing study funded by the University of Denver, recording everything just in case something ever happened, but the equipment had broken down long since, and nobody had seemed to notice, or care. The young guard never entered the Stadium, so, once inside, Kellenburger had the place pretty much to himself.

Inside, Kellenburger would set up his folding chair behind the faded outline of home plate, right where he used to stand to call the games, sit down in the dappled sunlight (the tent enclosing the infield had long since fallen down, leaving only a few metal girders and a few scraps of fabric that flapped lazily in the wind), and watch the Ball, which still hung motionless in the air, just as it had for almost fifty years now. He didn't expect to see anything, other than what had always been there to be seen. It was quiet inside the abandoned stadium, though, and peaceful. Bees buzzed by his ears, and birds flew in and out of the stadium, squabbling under the eaves, making their nests in amongst the broken seats, occasionally launching into liquid song. The air was thick with the rich smells of morning-glory and honeysuckle, which twined up around the ruined bleachers. Wildflowers had sprung up everywhere, and occasionally the tall grass in the outfield would rustle as some small unseen creature scurried through it. Kellenburger watched the Ball, his mind comfortably blank. Sometimes — more often than not, truth be told — he dozed and nodded in the honeyed sunlight.

As chance would have it, he happened to be awake and watching when the Ball moved at last.

Without warning, the Ball suddenly shot forward across the plate, just as if Holzman had thrown it only a second before, rather than nearly half a century in the past. With no catcher there to intercept it, it shot past home plate, hit the back wall, bounced high in the air, fell back to Earth, bounced again, rolled away, and disappeared into the tall weeds near what had once been the dugout.

After a moment of silent surprise, Kellenburger rose stiffly to his feet. Ponderously, he shuffled forward, bent over as much as he could, tilted his head creakingly this way and that, remembering the direction of the ball

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as it shot over the faded ghost of home plate, analyzing, judging angles. At last, slowly, he smiled.

"Strike!" he said, with satisfaction. "I *knew* it would be. You're *out*."

Then, without a backward look, without even a glance at where the famous Ball lay swallowed in the weeds, he picked up his folding chair, hoisted it to his shoulder, went out of the ruins of Independence Stadium, and, moving very slowly, shuffled home along the cracked and deserted street through the warm, bright, velvet air of spring.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR COVER STORY in May will be the first of several stories from M. Rickert in which she reinterprets classical Greek myths. "Leda" is a witty and powerful new take on the legend of the swan—this story is one you shouldn't miss.

Also on schedule for May is a new work of science fiction from Alex Irvine, another one of the interesting new voices gracing our pages these days. "Chichen Itza" takes us south to a crossroads where technology can open doors for us...or lead us further into isolation.

Next month also promises a fine array of columns, including James Sallis on the current crop of British sf writers, Paul Doherty and Pat Murphy asking us to select Door Number One, and...can it be? Will May 2002 see the return of Harlan Ellison's Watching? In the Shire, the good folk wait with bated breath.

This coming issue looks like a good one, so be sure to subscribe now so you won't miss it. In the bargain you'll also get yourself great new stories from the likes of Scott Bradfield, Paul Di Filippo, William Browning Spencer, and R. Garcia y Robertson.

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CURIOSITIES

UNDER THE TRIPLE SUNS, BY STANTON COBLENTZ (1955)

"THE CLIMB seemed never-ending. They clung to swaying cables over half-mile gulfs; crawled through funnels like the ventilators of a steamer; circled around nets patterned like acre-large cobwebs; scaled the precipitous slopes of branching ceiling supports; and elbowed their way past sleeping monsters whose phosphorescent green lidless eyes seemed somehow malevolently aware...his hands felt like bags of glue from contact with the sticky web-substance...."

Thus Dave Harrowell experiences the gargantuan tent city of the spidery Ugwugs in *Under the Triple Suns*, a forgotten tale praised by Damon Knight as an example of weird world-building.

Stanton Coblentz (1896-1982) once wore the mantle of sf's premier satirist. But he unfortunately exhibited a heavy prose style that weighed down his hijinx. This defect was offset by a fertile imagination for alien environments and a vivid presentation.

The last three survivors of humanity — Dave and Eunice Harrowell and Earle Henessey — flee to the stars. On the titular world, they encounter two races locked in Eloi-Morlock symbiosis: brutish Ugwug masters and wispy Lil-Bro slaves, both occupying the odd tentlike city of Harrowell's adventures. Naturally the humans enlist on the side of the slaves, eventually winning a tenuous freedom for the avian race.

Coblentz makes little of the Harrowells and Henessey being humanity's last procreative hope (although the group hug at the end has a bizarre sexual buzz). More potent is the undeniable anti-lynching riff Coblentz delivers. In the era of freedom-rider controversies, Coblentz's passions proved stronger than his art.

—Paul Di Filippo

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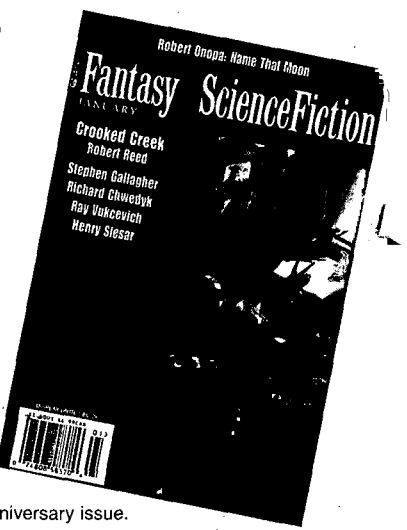

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